

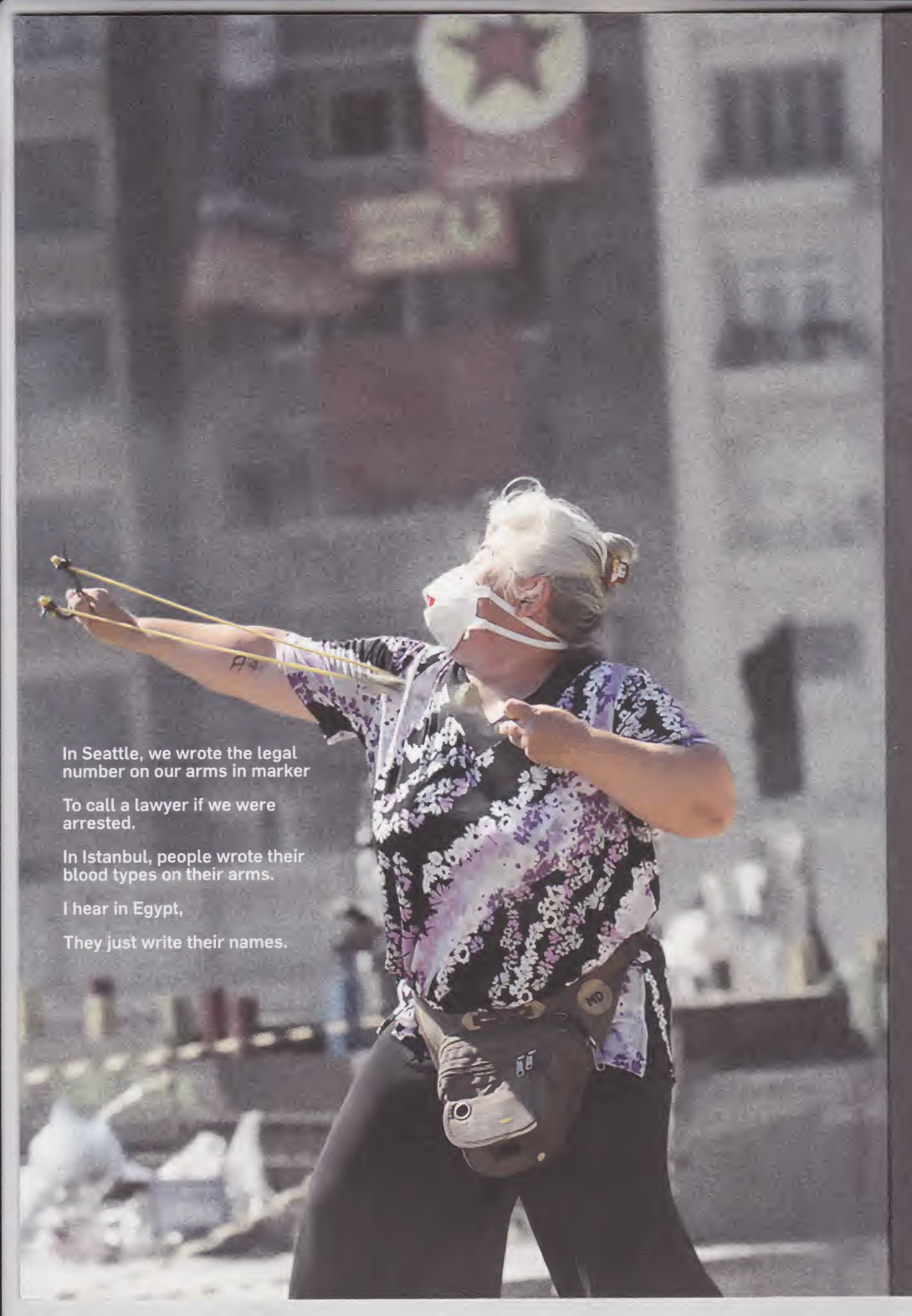
# An Anarchist Journal of Living Dangerously

## Rolling Thunder Issue Number Eleven / Spring 2014

revolutionary strategy · the life cycles of movements · prisoner revolt · beyond ally politics  
the rise and fall of the Oakland Commune · uprising in Istanbul · student strike in Montréal  
anarchism in Israel · fighting gentrification · deserting the digital utopia · eternity by the stars





A woman with blonde hair tied back, wearing a white face mask and a black and white floral patterned shirt, is aiming a yellow slingshot. She has a small tattoo on her right forearm. A brown fanny pack with a cartoon character is worn around her waist. The background is a blurred city street with a building featuring a large red star emblem.

In Seattle, we wrote the legal  
number on our arms in marker

To call a lawyer if we were  
arrested.

In Istanbul, people wrote their  
blood types on their arms.

I hear in Egypt,

They just write their names.



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"You must have chaos within you  
to give birth to a dancing star."  
—Friedrich Nietzsche

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**Going all the way** means defending parks and neighborhoods, bankrupting developers, bringing capitalism to a halt with a general strike. **Taking it to eleven** means local struggles metastasizing into nationwide uprisings, defeated enemies joining you on the barricades, surviving one revolutionary cataclysm to set off another.





# TAKING IT TO 11

The history of numbers is not just the history of quantification, but also a history of mysticism. For millennia, people have sought meaning in numbers, or sometimes in a single number. Christians have focused on the number 3, Masons the number 13, Jewish mystics the number 10, Douglas Adams the number 42. Each of these held the key to a secret.

For us, the really powerful number, the one that occasions a certain gleam in the eye, is the number eleven. Eleven is *one beyond*. It's the next level, the unexpected escalation, the thing that comes out of nowhere to exceed what everyone believed to be the *full maximum* of ten. It's the line between workplace grumblings and wildcat strike, the difference between atomized individuals and a cohesive crowd, the threshold between protest and riot. It is the unspoken element that can transform a prosaic conversation into a daring *point of departure*. It's the frontier between achieving and superseding.

Eleven doesn't lend itself to formulas. Unlike the numbers of the Christians or the Vedics, there is no set equation to bring out the eleven around us. If you stumble across eleven by chance and try to find it in the same place later, you will find that it has moved on. Mystics have propagated various incantations for harnessing the power of numbers,

but anarchists can only pursue eleven by throwing out all scripts and scripture. Freedom means casting ourselves into the unknown with no guarantees, relishing the uselessness of blueprints, *relinquishing control*. This is where anarchists thrive. Eleven is our hidden guide and ethos.

Eleven also means new beginnings—the moment when, having traversed a long and arduous road, we suddenly behold a landscape of unfamiliar possibility. It means starting again.

This journal began a decade ago in the waning days of the anti-globalization and anti-war movements, when the momentum that had brought us together was fading and it was time to chart a fresh course. Since then, we've seen friends stand trial as terrorists, enduring prison to return to our arms against all odds; we've seen new upheavals transform our cities into playgrounds, then battlefields. We've staked our freedom repeatedly and received it back with interest. We edit these pages today with the tools of our trade close at hand and the possibility of a new global wave of revolt in the wind. After the crest of every movement, after climax of every clash, we will pick up the pieces, take what we learned, and arm ourselves for the next adventure. We still hunt for eleven.

## ROLLING THUNDER: A JOURNAL OF DANGEROUS LIVING Issue Eleven, Spring 2014



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"The problem of language is at the heart of all the struggles between the forces striving to abolish the present alienation and those striving to maintain it. It is inseparable from the very terrain of those struggles. We live within language as within polluted air."

– Situationist International, "All the King's Men"

# Glossary of Terms

For further disambiguation and elucidation, consult our Contradictionary: [crimethinc.com/contradictionary](http://crimethinc.com/contradictionary)

**Benefactor** – Like reactionaries, do-gooders fear radical social change. If they lost their assets, who would help the needy?

"How could he who improves us, help being better than we?' Man has ever thought thus. Let us therefore improve mankind!—in this way we shall become good." –Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*

**Blowback** – For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction

**Capital** – Lethal (see *Capital Punishment*, *Capitalism*)

**Damnatio Memoriae** – I can't recall that ever happening to anyone

**Damnation** – On December 20, 1937, Nikolai Yezhov stood at the peak of his career. Tremendous banners emblazoned with his face adorned the walls of the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow alongside portraits of his mentor, Joseph Stalin. It was the twenty-year anniversary of the founding of the Soviet secret police, and the Bolshevik elite had gathered to celebrate.

Yezhov's singular gifts as an administrator had carried him to the apex of the Soviet security apparatus. Rooting out the ubiquitous "thugs" and "spies" from the ranks of the Party in what came to be known as the Great Terror, he earned a place at the side of Stalin himself. Wherever Stalin feared there might be a plot, Yezhov was quick to discover one.

The ensuing purges overshadowed anything that had come before. In only two years, over a million people were arrested, and half that number shot for crimes against the state. The population of the Gulags tripled; countless thousands died of malnutrition and exposure. Yezhov arrested the previous head of the secret police, his own former superior, and oversaw his torture, interrogation, trial, and execution.

The nation's poets filled its newspapers with paeans to the new hero: "Great Stalin's ardent call was heard by Yezhov with all his heart, all his blood..." Posters adorned the streets depicting him crushing the enemies of the people in his gauntleted fist. His wife hosted a literary salon featuring the best writers of the day; she and Yezhov could have sex with anyone they chose. He kept a file on her, too, just in case.



figure i.



Yes, things were going well for Yezhov! He had installed men he trusted in all the important positions below him. In the course of the shakeup, he had positioned himself quite advantageously. Indeed, should the Great Leader ever need replacing...

At that moment, Yezhov looked up at the walls of the Bolshoi Theater and saw the towering, impassive face of Joseph Stalin gazing down at him—and realized he was doomed.

After that night, he began to drink harder. He would drink heavily, then go to the prison to interrogate detainees. He had been an assiduous worker—the most assiduous in the country—but now he sometimes neglected even to show up. Yet nothing happened at first. Stalin was toying with him.

His wife sent increasingly desperate letters to Stalin as her lovers were arrested one after another. “Dear, beloved comrade Stalin... Let them take away my freedom, my life, I will accept it all, but I will not give up the right to love you, as everybody does who loves the country and the Party... Forgive me for my letter, written in bed...” Stalin left her letters unanswered. A few days after sending the last one, she committed suicide.

Finally, Yezhov was removed from his post. He was arrested, tortured, and interrogated by his successor in the secret police. Condemned to death in a secret trial, he was dragged screaming and crying into an execution chamber that had been built according to his specifications, with a drainage trough for the blood. His name suddenly disappeared from the papers (see *Damnatio Memoriae*) and his face vanished from the photographs that had showed him in Stalin’s company (see figure i.).

What goes around, comes around.

**Decorum** – Shout what you fear to whisper

**Drone** – A remote-controlled pilotless aircraft or citizen

**Editing** – A sentence that never ends (see figure ii.)

Emboldened by his victories over other Greek city-states, Philip II, king of Macedon and father of Alexander the Great, sent a proclamation to Sparta demanding immediate surrender. “You are advised to submit without further delay, for if I bring my army into your land, I will destroy your farms, slay your people, and raze your city.”

The taciturn Spartans contemplated this rambling missive for some time. Finally, they crossed out all the words save one, which they sent back via messenger: “If.”



figure ii.

**Electorate** – The silenced majority

**Encyclopedia** – All that professes to be comprehensive functions by exclusion

**Greater Good** – Better a lesser evil!

**Judgment** – Standards are overrated

**Malarkey** – From *mal-*, the Latin prefix for “bad,” and the Greek *arkh(e)ia*, denoting government; hence, redundantly, the opposite of anarchy

**Maoism** – If you want to make an omelet, you have to send millions to reeducation camps

**Misandry** – Bias against sexists

**Nightmare** – A dream come true

**Rapport de Force** – A balance of power owing to both parties being able to bring force to bear upon the other. A protest movement might establish a *rapport de force* with a government by showing itself capable of disrupting business as usual. That we must import this unfamiliar concept into English from French speaks volumes about the sorry state of social movements in the Anglophone world.

**Ringleader** – The first to put down an uprising. When the police arrive at a protest, their first question is always “Who’s in charge?” At best, dependence on leadership is an Achilles heel; at worst, it reproduces the authorities’ interests and power structure



inside the opposition. So long as there is a leader, he can be deputized, replaced, or at least taken hostage.

**Robot** – Derived from the Czech expression for serf's labor, the word "robot" first appeared in a play Karel Čapek wrote in 1920. Čapek took it for granted that the robots, initially used to replace workers, would end up slaughtering them—and ultimately their bosses as well: "Robots of the world, you are ordered to exterminate the human race. Do not spare the men. Do not spare the women. Preserve only the factories, railroads, machines, mines, and raw materials. Destroy everything else. Then return to work. Work must not cease."

**Self-Employed** – It is a misunderstanding to assume that the self-employed worker answers to no boss. On the contrary, he answers directly to the economy. When your boss is a human being, you can still dawdle and pilfer; when your boss is the economy itself, there's no escaping its logic.

**Self-Serving** – If it's humiliating to be ruled, how much more disgraceful to be one's own master!

**Socialism** – As they say in Eastern Europe, socialism is the painful transition between capitalism and capitalism

## Word of the Issue: **Virtue**

What makes people reliable comrades in the struggle for a better world? Is it politics, or aesthetics? Noble ideals, or bohemian adventurism? Adherence to principles, or rebellion against them?

In February 1848, Parisians rose up and overthrew the French king. The provisional government of the brand new Republic soon rescinded the few steps it had taken to address the plight of the poor—and the following June, the underclass once again barricaded the streets and called for revolution. The democrat Victor Hugo, who had just been elected to the National Assembly of the Republic, considered it his civic duty to accompany the army as it stormed the city and gunned down the rebels. Over ten thousand were butchered in a three-day hail of lead. Afterward, many shops could not reopen because all the employees had been killed.

Shortly thereafter, Napoleon's nephew was elected President of the Republic. At the end of his term, he organized a coup d'état that established him as Emperor, bringing the brief reign of democracy to an end. Victor Hugo implored Paris to rise against the usurper, but the workers turned him a deaf ear. Why should they risk their lives to preserve the authority of the democrats who had cut down the last uprising?

Now that the Reaction had no more use for the politicians who had paved the way for it, they too were herded into prison and exile. Their elections and patriotism had served to maintain the legitimacy of the government just long enough for a shrewder tyrant to take the helm. Urging the poor to break the law in the name of the Constitution, Hugo and his comrades revealed the contradictions inherent in their lukewarm revolutionism.



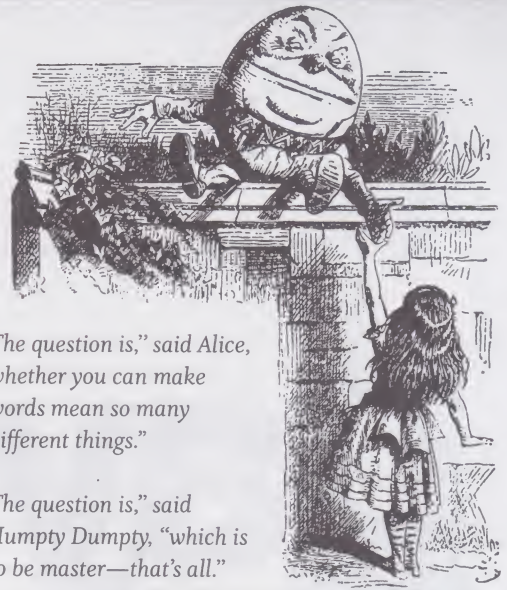
*The Democrat and the Decadent*

**Time-Saving Technologies** – The faster everything works, the more quickly everything can happen; hence, rather than saving time, we rush past everything it once offered us

**Tough-minded** – Capable of great fortitude in bearing others' sufferings

**Valentine's Day** – The day when all the bills of romance come due

**Vandalism** – Ever since the sack of Rome, what is written in ink as "catastrophe" is painted on walls as revenge



"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

With the novels he published from exile, Victor Hugo earned worldwide acclaim for putting words in the mouths of the same poor people whose slaughter he had overseen. He wrote about the events of June 1848 in his memoirs, bemoaning "on one side the despair of the people, on the other the despair of society," sidestepping his role in the killings he described with such pathos. In *Les Misérables*, he struggled to make sense of how the people who had made the revolution could take up arms against its legitimately elected representatives:

It sometimes happens that, even contrary to principles, even contrary to liberty, equality, and fraternity, even contrary to the universal vote, even contrary to the government, by all for all, from the depths of its anguish, of its discouragements and its destitutions, of its fevers, of its distresses, of its miasmas, of its ignorances, of its darkness, that great and despairing body, the rabble, protests against, and that the populace wages battle against, the people.

It was necessary to combat it, and this was a duty, for it attacked the republic. But what was June, 1848, at bottom? A revolt of the people against itself... It attacked in the name of the revolution—what? The revolution. It—that barricade, chance, hazard, disorder, terror, misunderstanding, the unknown—faced the Constituent Assembly, the sovereignty of the people, universal suffrage, the nation, the Republic.

Victor Hugo's devotion to principles caused him to side with society against those who compose it; with sovereignty against liberty; with humanity against human beings.

Charles Baudelaire, a poet and dandy who cultivated a reputation for decadence, also participated in the events of 1848. He took pains to emphasize that he had no political motivations: "I have no convictions, as understood by the people of my century, because I have no ambition. There is no basis for my belief." What interest could this acolyte of anomie have in social struggle?

Yet in February 1848, Baudelaire joined the uprising with a brand new double-barreled rifle and jaunty yellow cartridge belt. His friend Jules Buisson encountered him in the center of the upheaval. "I've just fired my first shot!" the poet called out enthusiastically.

Buisson was astonished at this apparent change of heart: "Not for the Republic, surely?"

That June, at much greater risk to himself, Baudelaire returned to the streets to fight on the side of the rabble against their leaders. Even Proudhon, one of the first people to identify openly as an anarchist, did not go so far. Scorning fine words about the rights of the suffering masses, Baudelaire nonetheless saw no distinction between the wretched of the earth and the darkness in his own heart. Against the Constituent Assembly, the sovereignty of the people, universal suffrage, and the Republic, the future author of *The Flowers of Evil* could only side with chance, hazard, disorder, the unknown.

We must imagine Charles Baudelaire at the barricade in June of 1848, facing off against an army of pious patriots and well-intentioned Victor Hugos. As the explosions begin to ring out, he cocks his rifle and takes a shot at the nation, at principles, at blood-soaked goodness and morality: "Art for art's sake, motherfuckers!"





## LETTERS FROM THE OTHER SIDE

In the digital age, who writes letters anymore? Prisoners, that's who. In earlier issues of *Rolling Thunder*, we've printed letters from such notable prisoners as Andy Stepanian and Rob los Ricos. This issue, we offer a tale of resistance from anarchist prisoner Sean Swain. To learn more about how to support Sean, and to read more of his writing, visit [www.seanswain.org](http://www.seanswain.org).

# Days of Tear Gas, Blood, & Vomit

**How prisoners overwhelmed fascist forces in the July 4<sup>th</sup> rebellion at ManCI.  
A participant's account from inside the special manglement unit.**

Gandhi would not approve. It's July 11, 2013, eight days since my last dispatch when Blackjack was strapping the plastic lunch tray to his arm. Since then, it's been a rough-and-tumble bucket-o-blood back here in the Special Manglement Unit of Mansfield Corruptional Institution. Blackjack's missing three teeth (that he really doesn't use much back here anyway) and my stomach injuries had me puking for a time (no blood, a good sign), but as of today, neither of us are leaking fluids and the fascist fuckweasels have now moved us to the veritable suburbs of the SMU.

This is the whole story, and most of it is true. July 4 began with emergency lockdown, the fascists all hopped up on adrenaline, coffee, and the news of the

escape that happened the previous night. Turns out, a prisoner escaped the old-fashioned way. He leaned a steel ladder against the fence and left. No shit.

But as with any other situation where popular forces strike a successful blow against the fuckweasel control system, those of us still locked in the show-box take the full brunt of it. Breakfast was shit and there was no recreation. So even before Warden Terry Tibbals, a.k.a, BLACK LIGHTNING, arrived at his office with his bag of donuts and cup of decaf, all hell had already broke loose in the Special Manglement Unit.

Forty steel doors banging, busted sprinkler heads pounding thousands of gallons of rusty water down

the stairs and cascading over the top range, the Nazis jacking cans of pepper spray and running for the exit.

Fuck them. It's not like they planned to have a barbecue anyway.

So, if you've been locked in the shoebox for any length of time, you know what's coming. A captain or a major will soon be on-station to announce his own importance, only to find every fucking cell-door window blocked and barricaded, whereupon he will slosh with wet socks and shoes back to an office to call in the Extraction Team—a crew of genetic oddities on brain-entrancing drugs, clad in jackboots and helmets, shields and flak vests. Their whole reason to exist is to crush human skulls and reckless abandon, cell-to-cell, breaking bones and spirits; but from the rumbling of the steel doors, we knew they'd better get some chips and beer, because they were gonna be there a while.

In SMU4B, Blackjack and I occupied the cell closest to the entrance, so by dumb luck and a twist of fate, we were the front line of the very first battle, ground zero in the struggle between the rebellion and the goddamn stormtroopers goose-stepping in mechanical unison, hopped up on their innate hatred of humanity and the echoes of unhappy childhoods.

It would be seven on two, close quarters blind fighting, the hierarch machine coming to exterminate the anarchist tendency once and for all, and for our part, the possibility that we would fight and die, not for some inglorious cause, but driven by the simple sad reality that it's better to fight and perhaps die than to live as slaves.

Blackjack and I took a quick inventory and came up with an impromptu battle plan. They might kill us, might pound us to death, but they were going to know we were here. The least we could do on the way out, with the snapping of bones and growls of rage, would be to scar these fascist fuckweasels for life so they wake up from sweaty nightmares decades from now and realize that yet again they've shit the bed, screaming my name, "SWAIN!", since no one knows how to pronounce Blackjack's name, Blackjack included.

## Welcome to Waco

We know how it goes down. The Extraction Team opens the food slot and sprays an industrial sized can of outdoor-use-only pepper spray into the cell, a space the size of a bathroom, blasting some napalm-death that peels off skin and lights the lungs on fire. So we had to prepare for that. Then, they'd key the door and bull-rush in, a phalanx behind riot shields

and helmets, pounding ahead and crushing anything organic in their way. At least seven of them, taming, breaking, punishing.

We had to stop that too.

The fascist fuckweasels had the latest technology for violence and brutality. We had a plastic bag, styrofoam cups, shampoo, toothpaste, sheets, blankets, a broom, socks, soap, two lunch trays, a razor blade and a stapler.

I don't know where the fuck we got the stapler, but it was brand new and had a full compliment of staples. We quickly concluded that while it was convenient for all our segregation office needs, the stapler really proved quite irrelevant in a violent struggle for liberation against the forces of fuckweaselry. But all that other shit could kick a fucking dent in their machinery.

By the time those goose-stepping goons arrived, we were prepared—and the fascists would wish they could trade places with ATF agents crawling across the roof of some half-baked cult leader clinging to his bibles and guns in a podunk Texas town.

Welcome to Waco.

## The Standoff—No, Scratch That: The Epic Motherfucking Standoff to End All Standoffs

If you're reading this on your iPhone in study hall, don't try this at home.

Well, unless you really, *really* hate your parents.

Unable to see into the cell because the window in the cell door was blocked, the fascists opened the food slot, only to find a bed sheet hanging in front of the door. They still couldn't see. On top of that, a blanket was wedged in the 4-inch frame of the outside window with a roll of toilet paper to block the light from the sun, making the cell pitch dark. The lead fuckweasel reached his hand into the food slot to grab the sheet and yank it down, only to take a bar of soap in a sock across the knuckles, quickly withdrawing his hand with a stream of obscenities.

I was a pitcher in little league. I can swing the shit out of a sock.

Angered, they went straight to the pepper-spray, letting loose with about a gallon of it. What they didn't know is that we used a whole tube of toothpaste, minty fresh and approved by the American Dental Association, to adhere a plastic bag over the food slot. That bag caught every bit of the pepper spray and when I hit that bag with the soap-in-a-sock, it coughed its contents right back at the fuckweasels who unleashed it.



That sent them running and sprawling into the cascading toilet water, coughing and cussing with gallons of snot pouring down the flesh of their inflamed faces.

Cancel the family outing with the fireworks. You're not gonna be feeling very festive.

So as they splashed in the toilet water and rinsed their faces, the door rattling reached a savage pitch and I knew the maniacs and wildmen behind those steel doors were chewing on the inside of their own mouths just to get the taste of blood.

And here's an abject lesson for all the forces of fascism from the colonizer troops in the oil wars to the pigs firing rubber bullets into occupy encampments to the fuckweasel prison guards imposing the program at the hot end of a can of pepper spray: It's all fun and games until someone loses an eye. And then it's just FUN.

They formed up, fueled on rage and pain, a seething hate machine, and keyed the door. It swung wide open and they came in behind the shield, into the dark unknown. They still could not see because the sheet wasn't fastened to the door; it didn't move when the door moved. It remained in the doorway because we hung the sheet from a curtain rod we created out of styrofoam cups—a lot of styrofoam cups, stacked, like 50 of them, and then wedged into the door frame. So when they came marching into the battle dome, they came in blind with the sheet draped in front of their faces.

They didn't see the shampoo on the floor or the plastic cup lids floating in the shampoo. The shield-man's jackboots slid on the cup lids and he went hydro-planing forward, shoved from behind by the six-man phalanx that followed.

Keep in mind, there's a steel bunk bed three feet in from the door and it's bolted to the floor, creating a bottleneck: a three-foot square killing floor where the goons must come in single-file across shampoo and cup lids sliding under their feet, as they follow a blinded shield-man into a dark room, a sheet hanging in his face.

The shield-man didn't see me in the shower, pulling the trip line tight. It caught his foot and he fell forward, his fuckweasel friends piling up behind him. Blackjack and I both began yelling, "I got him! I got him!" and "Stop resisting! Stop resisting!" to give the impression that the shield-man hadn't fallen, but had instead tackled one of us.

I let go of the trip line and pulled the strip of sheet we had cut with the razor blade to hook into the sprinkler. I yanked it hard, unleashing thousands of gallons of black gunk fire suppressant pushed by tens of thousands of gallons of water. It was cold and disorienting and blinding, immediately blasting the pile of fuckweasels like a fire-hose from the ceiling.

That was Blackjack's cue. They hadn't seen him under the mattress on the top bunk. He sprang to his feet, all possible pepper-spray neutralized by the water filling the air, and with his half of the broomstick secured to his wrist with a strip of bedsheet (so that if he dropped it, he could recall it to his hand with a flick of the wrist), he leaped down from the top rack onto the fuckweasel heap, swinging like a madman. From the opposite side, out of the shower, I rushed into the maelstrom with my half of the broomstick tied to my wrist, and the soap-in-a-sock in my other hand, screaming and snarling like a savage. In no time, we were behind the bewildered pile of drenched muscle and heavy equipment, and we bolted for the door.

Fuck everything else. If we got through the open cell door and out into the block, we faced one guard with a cell phone taking video and another guard with a handful of keys.

Yeah. Keys. The great equalizer. We had 2 primitive clubs in our fists, rags wrapped round our faces, and as many as 78 other comrades trapped behind steel doors—doors that could be opened with those keys. We only had to get out of the cell and lock the extraction team inside. But, as we reached the door, the fuckweasels outside the cell dropped everything and threw themselves against the closing door. Blackjack got his club wedged in to keep it from

**We crawled forward in the ice-cold water and gunk, clawing at the fallen guards, but before we gained purchase, the extraction team had us by the legs, dragging us back into the containment of the cell, our nails dragging on the concrete, one pig's tasteful yet understated loafer still gripped in my left hand, pepper spray firing from every direction.**



closing as he struggled against the door, I swung on the extraction team trying to regain their feet, and a helmet flew against the wall.

Unfortunately, there was no head inside it. Maybe next time.

Blackjack thrust against the door and it gave, knocking down the guards on the outside, and we tumbled out of the cell and into the block, the rattling doors and cheers completely deafening. We crawled forward in the ice-cold water and gunk, clawing at the fallen guards, but before we gained purchase, the extraction team had us by the legs, dragging us back into the containment of the cell, our nails dragging on the concrete, one pig's tasteful yet understated loafer still gripped in my left hand, pepper spray firing from every direction.

Strange, but they didn't beat us to death. Sure, they got their random kicks and punches in as they held us down and confiscated our weapons, but then they bolted, leaving us sprawled, broken and bloody in a flood of toilet water on the concrete floor.

It was surprisingly comfortable, but I still had all my teeth. As amazing as this is, with all the damage the fascist fuckweasels have inflicted over the decades, the dentist tells me that my teeth are in fantastic shape. Blackjack's missing three. We couldn't find them. And, even if we could, they had been floating in toilet water.

I pulled something in my abdomen that caused me to puke from the pain for a few days, and we both have scorch marks from random pepper-spray blasts, but no broken bones. Our eyes are still firmly in their sockets, and neither of us appears to be leaking any vital fluids.

It took a long time for the fascists to regain control of SMU 4, as they faced inspired and courageous resistance in every cell. The extraction team left the unit at the end of their shift dispirited and haunted by their experience.

Brave new world, shitbags. Brave new motherfuckin' world.

## The Aftermath

We *should* be dead right now. I mean, several prisoners died here in Terry "Black Lightning" Tibbals' mismanaged care for a hell of a lot less. Our survival seems a complete absurdity. But here we are.

The official story is that the video of events was lost when the pig dropped the cell phone in his effort to contain us in Cell 1019. I suspect that's bullshit. I suspect that nobody wants to explain why we had a broomstick in the first place (general incompetence by the pigs on cell-cleaning day), or

why the extraction team marched into a cell without visual capacity, or how two starved-out captives outmaneuvered and out-fought their best fuckweasel fighting force. Whatever their motive, I've been told that these events didn't happen... not the way they happened, anyway.

## Hella Hella Occupy

Four days later, we remained in a burned-out shell of a cell, paint peeled from the walls, chunks of concrete missing out of the ceiling. So on July 8, as Pelican Bay revolutionaries undertook a monumental, historic hunger-strike, Blackjack and I were cuffed and escorted *out to the outdoor recreation cage*. No shit.

Beginning at 6:30 in the morning, we announced to the fuckweasel establishment that we were occupying the recreation cage and not giving it back until our demands were met. Inside the block, the rest of the SMU4 prisoners were again off the chain, rattling doors and flooding the unit. By dinner, they sent in a negotiator to use his "interpersonal communication" training to talk us out of the cage. When that failed, they called the extraction team... who simply did not show up.

Officer Miller, a shitbag of the highest order and a regular feature on SMU4 (who can be reached by calling ManCI and then dialing 806 and extension 6101), took a cell phone video of our demands for coming out of the recreation cage. When told all demands would be met, we surrendered, only to be dragged, handcuffed, back to our burned-out cave to find our food in the toilet and most of our property destroyed. Miller and Bradshaw had taken all of our soap, toilet paper, and pens. As if we needed them.

Amazingly, the stapler we hid under the steel sink and toilet combo remained there, and was in perfect working condition.

Officer Miller threatened to put his dick and balls in our food, so—as a natural consequence, Blackjack and I went without food the entire day, right along with the heroes of Pelican Bay and the thousands of hunger strikers across the country and around the world. Miller's threats sparked a night of mayhem, leading the Gestapo High Command to conclude that Blackjack and I are a dangerous influence, and they moved us out of that stagnant cave in SMU 4 to the veritable zombie suburbs of SMU2—a comfortable peaceful corner of the special manglement unit where we are surrounded by prisoners incapable of action if you lit their asses on fire and chased them with a super-soaker filled with gasoline. The mentality of the entire unit revolves around a betting ticket put



# **All I'm saying is, if a former gas station attendant and a former sandwich station tech at Wendy's can nearly defeat the hyper-fascist forces inside the State's own mind-fuck control unit by employing Styrofoam cups, a tube of toothpaste, and a broken broomstick, what hope exists for the capitalist pigs and their fuckweasel enforcers?**

out by a prisoner called Vegas, and daily discussions of professional sports events. No revolution here.

Though we've been put out to pasture, the situation has greatly improved. Our food portions are back to standard; the laundry service has resumed; the cells are clean and dry, without toilet water pouring from the ceiling; and Blackjack and I are now in a cell where we can sleep without steel doors three feet away, banging us awake every half hour.

Some kind of disciplinary action was taken against us, but we don't know what it was, since we refuse to answer any more conduct reports. When the officer who came to shackle us heard we refused to go, he asked, "Are we gonna have to do this the hard way?" We responded, "you better go ask the extraction team." He left and never returned.

So there's a lesson to derive from all this: the only effective answer to state terror in any form is equal and opposite revolutionary violence. Plain and simple. It's the only thing the fascist fuckweasels understand.

I think of the last nine and a half months that Blackjack and I foolishly tried to go along with the fascist program, to appeal to reason, to employ the non-violent processes made available to us—while our captors reduced us to conditions that were inhumane and intolerable, starving us out. If only we had undertaken this path nine months earlier, and maintained it, we might be drinking martinis by an Olympic-sized swimming pool right now.

A point Derrick Jensen made in *Endgame* applies here: more prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps survived by resisting than by going along with the program.\*

So I think about the events of these last eight days and consider how the world would be different if this approach had been undertaken by the Occupy encampments across the US and around the world, undertaken by everyone rejecting the global concentration camp imposed on us all. Imagine if the

\* Sean's support committee note that, as he does not have access to the internet, he doesn't know about Derrick Jensen's recent defense of transphobia and authoritarian politics.

skull-bashing and finger snapping pigs of the state terror machine, instead of being met with passive resistance to the dismantling of the encampments, had been met with Molotov cocktails and bowling balls raining from roof tops and resisters sporting helmets, shoulder pads, and baseball bats appropriated from Dick's sporting goods; or had faced man-hole covers blasting into the sky and streets collapsing under them from improvised explosive devices in the sewers—perhaps the trajectory of history would be quite different today.

All I'm saying is, if a former gas station attendant and a former sandwich station tech at Wendy's can nearly defeat the hyper-fascist forces inside the State's mind-fuck control unit by employing Styrofoam cups, a tube of toothpaste, and a broken broomstick, what hope exists for the crapitalist pigs and their fuckweasel enforcers? If only a small fraction of so-called anarchists, revolutionaries, freedom fighters, libertarians, tea-partiers, or Occupy supporters got serious for a moment, all the world's officer Millers would have to remove their balls from our instant potatoes and run naked, screaming for their miserable and worthless lives, chased by angry hordes carrying pitchforks and torches, demanding a reckoning. I don't want to impress you. I don't even want to inspire you. I just want to wake you up. The state is a can of pepper spray and there's no reasoning with it. Freedom means destroying it.

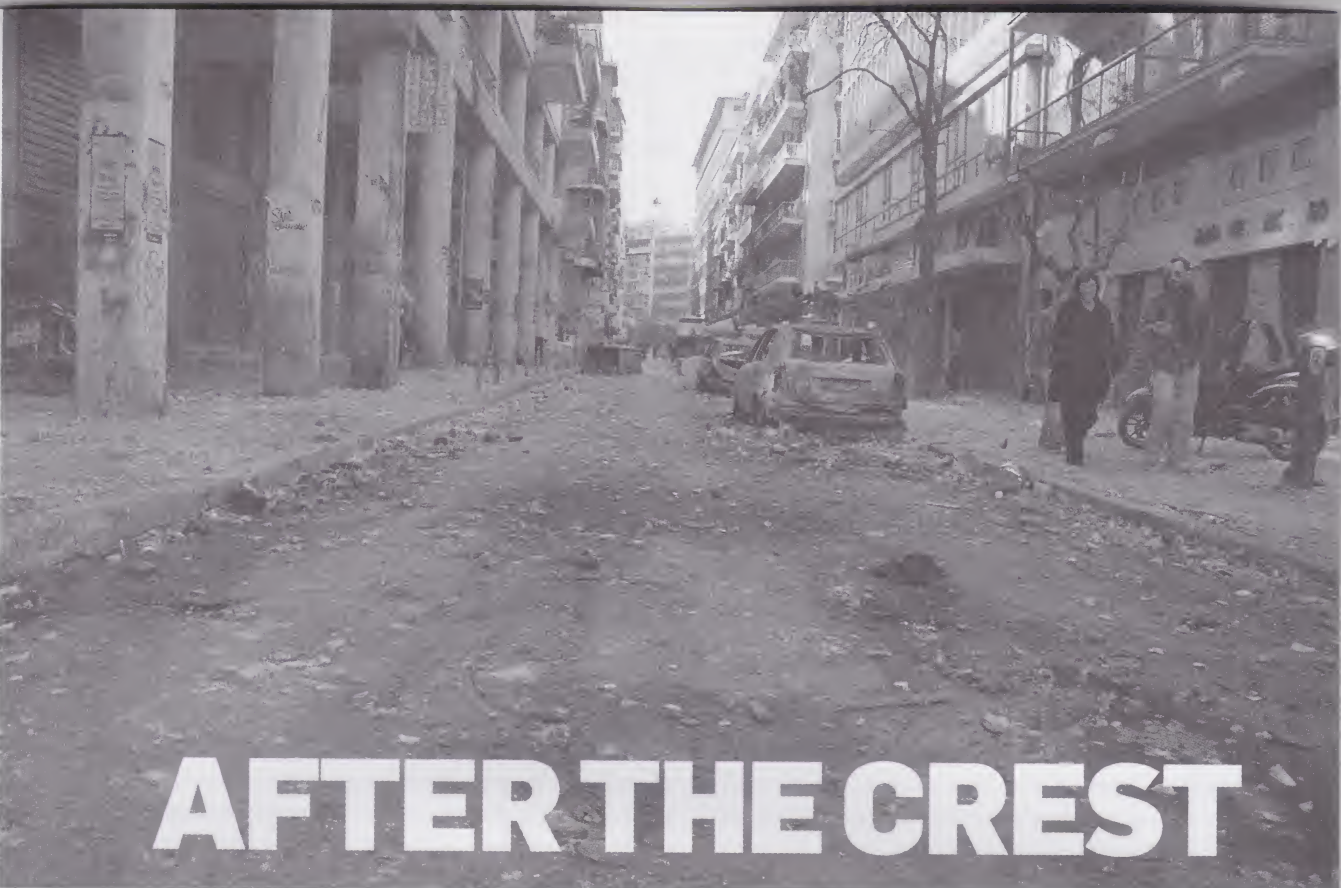
We don't need Gandhi's approval. This is reality, however we feel about it. We need Gandhi to pass that tube of toothpaste and strap that lunch tray to his arm. This is how you take back the future.

Brave new motherfucking world, Mohandas.  
Brave new motherfucking world.

Freedom or Death,

Sean Swain  
Anarchist Prisoner of War  
Mansfield Corruptional Institution  
Super Mind-fuck Unit 2





# AFTER THE CREST

## What to Do while the Dust Is Settling

At the high point, it seems like it will go on forever. You feel invincible, unstoppable. Then the crash comes: court cases, disintegration, depression.

Once you go through this several times, the rhythm becomes familiar. It becomes possible to recognize these upheavals as the heartbeat of something greater than any single movement.

Over the past six years, cities on several continents have seen peaks of struggle: Athens, London, Barcelona, Cairo, Oakland, Montréal, Istanbul, São Paulo. A decade ago, anarchists would converge from around the world to participate in a single summit protest. Now many have participated in months-long upheavals in their own cities, and more surely loom ahead.

But what do we do after the crest? If a single upheaval won't bring down capitalism, we have to ask what matters about these high points—what we hope to get out of them, how they figure in our long-term vision, and how to make the most of the waning period that follows them. This is especially pressing today, when we can be sure that there are more upheavals on the way.

To this end, we organized a dialogue with anarchists in some of the cities that have seen these climaxes of conflict, including Oakland, Barcelona, and Montréal. Practically all of the participants in these discussions independently reported that it was really hard for them to formulate their thoughts: "I don't know why, but whenever I sit down to work on it, I get depressed." This suggests a broader problem. Many anarchists depend on a triumphalist narrative, in which we have to go from victory to victory to have anything to talk about. But movements, too, have natural life cycles. They inevitably peak and die down. If our strategies are premised on endless growth, we are setting ourselves up for inevitable failure. That goes double for the narratives that determine our morale.

**Movement:** A mysterious social phenomenon that aspires to growth yet, when observed, always appears to be in decline.

When social change is gathering momentum, it is protean and thus invisible; only when it stabilizes as a fixed quantity is it possible to affix a label to it, and from that moment on it can only decompose. This



explains why movements burst like comets into the public consciousness at the high point of their innovation, followed by a long tail of diminishing returns. A sharper eye can see the social ferment behind these explosions, perennial and boundless, alternately drawing in new participants and emitting new waves of activity, as if in successive breaths.

In Occupy Oakland, a three-week occupation gave way to a six-month decline. This bears repeating: *movements spend most of their time in decline*. That makes it all the more important to consider how to make the most of the waning phase.

As all movements inevitably reach limits, it is pointless to bewail their passing—as if they would go on growing indefinitely if only the participants were *strategic enough*. If we presume the goal of any tactic is always to maintain the momentum of a particular movement, we will never be able to do more than react quixotically against the inexorable passing of time. Rather than struggling to stave off dissolution, we should act with an eye to the future.

This could mean consolidating the connections that have developed during the movement, or being sure to go out with a bang to inspire future movements, or revealing the internal contradictions that the movement never solved. Perhaps, once a movement has reached its limits, the most important thing to do in the waning phase is to point to what a future movement would have to do to transcend those limits.

We had occupied the building for almost 24 hours, and we were starting to imagine that we could somehow hold onto it. I was about to go out for supplies to fortify the place when something caught my eye. There in the dust of the abandoned garage was a hood ornament from a car that hadn't been manufactured in 40 years. I reached down to pick it up, then hesitated: I could always look at it later. On impulse, I took it anyway. A half hour later, a SWAT squad surrounded the building for blocks in every direction. We never recovered any of the things we built or brought there. Over a hundred of us met, danced, and slept in that building, outside the bounds of anything we'd previously been able to imagine in our little town, and that little hood ornament is all I have to show it happened.

When I visited my friends in the Bay Area the following week, they were in the same state of elation I had been when I left the building: "We walk around and people see us and call out **OCC-U-PY!** Things are just going to grow and keep on growing!"

## Keep perspective.

During a crescendo of social struggle, it can be difficult to maintain perspective; some things seem central yet prove transitory, while other things fall by the wayside that afterwards turn out to have been pivotal. Often, we miss opportunities to foster long-term connections, taking each other for granted in the urgency of responding to immediate events. Afterwards, when the moment has passed, we don't know how to find each other—or we have no reason to, having burned our bridges in high-stress situations. What is really important, the tactical success of a particular action, or the strength of the relationships that come out of it?

Likewise, it is rarely easy to tell where you are in the trajectory of events. At the beginning, when the window of possibility is wide open, it is unclear how far things can go; often, anarchists wait to get involved until others have already determined the character of the movement. Later, at the high point, it can seem that the participants are at the threshold of tremendous new potential—when in fact that window of possibility has already begun to close. This confusion makes it difficult to know when it is the right time to shift gears to a new strategy.

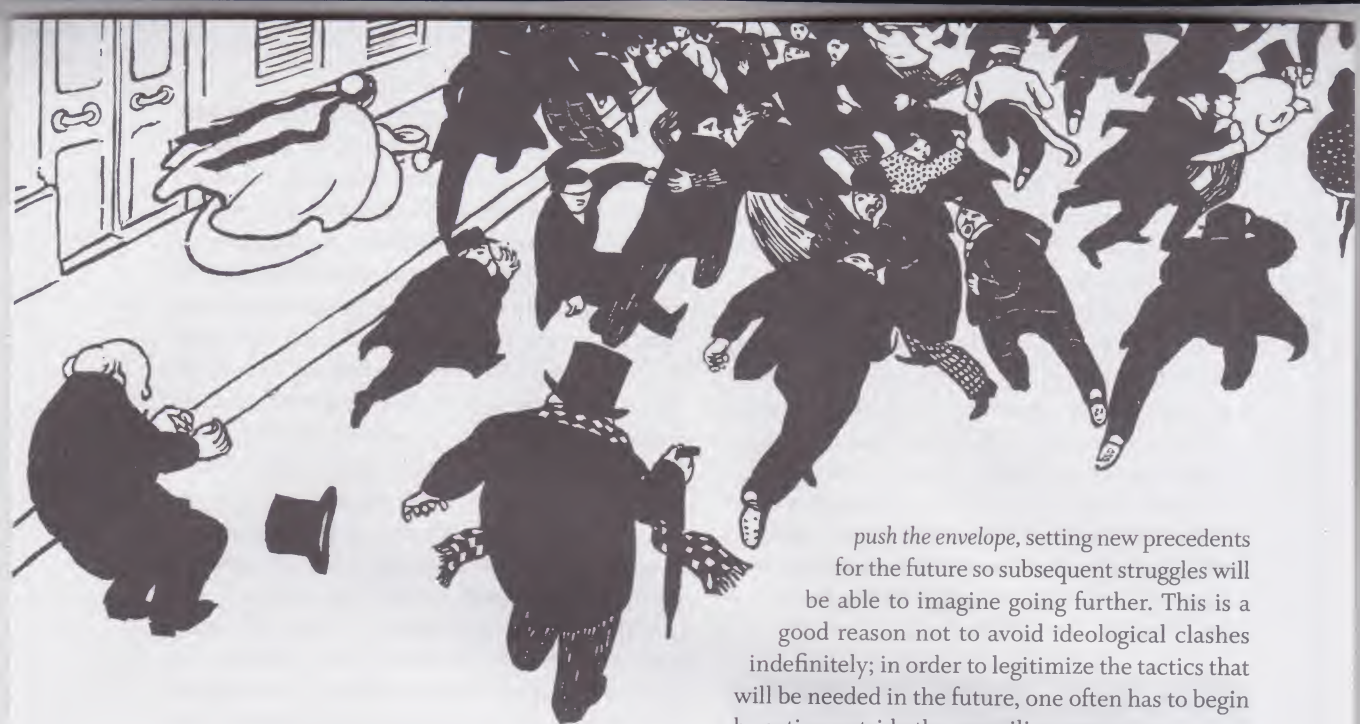
We were outside at a café in downtown Oakland a couple months later. I was asking what my friends thought the prospects were for the future. "Things will pick up again when spring arrives," they assured me.

At first I believed them. Wasn't everyone saying the same thing all around the country? Then it hit me: we were sitting there in the sunshine, wearing t-shirts, in the city that had seen the most intense action of the whole Occupy movement. If there wasn't another occupation there already, it wasn't coming back.

## Keep the window of possibility open while you can; if you have to split, split on your own terms.

Movements usually begin with an explosion of uncertainty and potential. So long as the limits are unclear, a wide range of participants have cause to get involved, while the authorities must hold back, unsure of the consequences of repression. How do we keep this window of possibility open as long as possible without sidestepping real disagreements?





(Think of Occupy Wall Street when it first got off the ground and all manner of radical and reactionary tendencies mingled within it.) Is it better to postpone clashes over ideological issues—such as nonviolence versus diversity of tactics—or to precipitate them? (Think of the controversial black bloc in Occupy Oakland on November 2, 2011.)

One way to approach this challenge is to try to clarify the issues at stake without drawing fixed lines of political identity in the process. As soon as a tactical or ideological disagreement is understood as a conflict between distinct social bodies, the horizon begins to close. The moment of potential depends on the fluidity of the movement, the circulation of ideas outside their usual domains, the emergence of new social configurations, and the openness of individual participants to personal transformation. The entrenchment of fixed camps undermines all of these.

This problem is further complicated by the fact that the top priority of the authorities is always to divide movements—often along the same lines that the participants themselves wish to divide. It may be best to try not to precipitate any permanent breaks until the horizon of possibility has closed, then make sure that the lines are drawn on your own terms, not the terms of the authorities or their unwitting liberal stooges.

## Push the envelope.

What is still possible once the horizon has been circumscribed? In a dying movement, one can still

*push the envelope*, setting new precedents for the future so subsequent struggles will be able to imagine going further. This is a good reason not to avoid ideological clashes indefinitely; in order to legitimize the tactics that will be needed in the future, one often has to begin by acting outside the prevailing consensus.

For example, at the conclusion of November 2, 2011, Occupy Oakland participants controversially attempted to take over a building. This provoked a great deal of backlash, but it set a precedent for a series of building occupations that enabled Occupy to begin to challenge the sanctity of private property during its long waning phase—giving Occupy a much more radical legacy than it would otherwise have had.

## One year's breakthroughs are the next year's limitations.\*

During the burgeoning stage of a movement, participants often become fixated on certain tactics. There is a tendency to try to repeat one's most recent successes; in the long run, this can only produce conservatism and diminishing returns. Diminishing returns are still returns, of course, and a tactic that is no longer effective in its original context may offer a great deal of potential in another setting—witness the occupation of Taksim Square in

\* For example, the emphasis on tactical nonviolence that enabled a large body to converge around Occupy Wall Street became an obstacle to keeping the streets when repression escalated. Often, in places where a movement crosses a new threshold, it subsequently remains suspended at that point of development, limited by the same structures that enabled it to advance. After the occupation of the capitol in Madison in spring 2011, activity in Wisconsin never caught up to what followed in New York, just as Occupy Wall Street never matched the intensity of Occupy Oakland. In February 2012, after Occupy Oakland had died down, the student strike in Montréal set the high-water mark for contemporary struggle in North America—and anarchists in Montréal are still paying the price of this high point, facing intense police repression.



June 2013, when no one in the US could imagine occupying anything ever again. But tactics and rhetoric eventually become used up. Once no one expects anything new from them, the same slogans and strategies that generated so much momentum become obstacles.

As soon as Occupy is in the news, anyone who had an occupation in mind had better hurry to carry it out before the window of opportunity has closed and nobody wants to occupy anything at all. In a comic example of this tendency to fixate on certain tactics, after Occupy Oakland was evicted, Occupy Wall Street mailed a large number of tents across the country as a gesture of support. These tents merely took up storage space over the following months as the struggle in Oakland reached its conclusion on other terrain.



## Don't regress to outmoded strategies.

Sometimes, after a new strategy that is attuned to the present context has created new momentum, there is a tendency to revert to previous approaches that have long ceased working. When people with little prior experience converge in a movement, they sometimes demand guidance from those who have a longer history of involvement; more often, it is the veterans themselves who demand to provide this guidance. Unfortunately, longtime activists frequently bring in old tactics and strategies, using the new opportunity to resume the defeated projects of the past.

For example, fourteen years ago, worldwide summit-hopping offered a way to exert transnational leverage against capitalist globalization, offering a model to replace the local and national labor organizing that had been outflanked by the international mobility of corporations. Yet when labor activists got involved, they criticized summit-hoppers for running around the world rather than organizing locally the old-fashioned way. Likewise, Occupy got off the ground because it offered a new model for an increasingly precarious population to stand up for itself without stable economic positions from which to mobilize. But again, old-fashioned labor activists saw this new movement only as a potential pool of bodies to support union struggles, and channeled its momentum into easily co-opted dead ends.

In the wake of every movement, we should study what its successes and failures show about our current context, while recognizing that by the time we can make use of those lessons the situation will have changed once more.

## Beware of rising expectations.

When a movement is at its high point, it becomes possible to act on a scale previously unimaginable. This can be debilitating afterwards, when the range of possibility contracts again and the participants are no longer inspired by the tactics they engaged in before the crest. One way to preserve momentum past the end of a movement is to go on setting attainable intermediate goals and affirming even the humblest efforts toward them.

The trajectory of green anarchist struggles in Oregon at the turn of the last century offers a dramatic example of this kind of inflation. At the beginning, the goals were small and concrete: protect a specific tree or a specific stretch of forest. After the protests against the 1999 World Trade Organization summit in Seattle, the goals of green anarchists in the region hypertrophied until they reached a tactical impasse. When your immediate objective is to “take down industrial civilization,” just about anything you can do is going to feel pointless.

Indeed, during a declining phase, it may be important to resist the tendency to escalate. When the SHAC campaign ran aground, a group called Root Force set out to apply the same strategy against a much bigger target\*—scaling up from a single animal testing corporation to the major infrastructural projects underlying transnational capitalism. A SHAC-style campaign targeting a *smaller* corporation might

\* As described in *Rolling Thunder* #6.



have succeeded, empowering a new generation to go on applying the strategy, but Root Force never even got off the ground.

## Quit while you're ahead.

The declining phase of a movement can be a dangerous time. Often, popular support has died down and the forces of repression have regained their footing, but the participants still have high hopes and feel a sense of urgency. Sometimes it's best to shift focus before something really debilitating occurs.

Yet quitting while you're ahead is complicated. If the connections that have been made are premised on collective action, it can be difficult to retain these without staying in the streets together.

Months after Occupy Oakland was definitively over, police brutally attacked an anarchist march against Columbus Day, making several arrests and pressing felony charges. It is an open question whether this showed that anarchists had overextended themselves, but after a payback action the following night in Oakland, street activity in the Bay Area died down for almost a year. On the other hand, after the 2010 UK student movement died down, an explosion of riots in August 2011 suggested that many of the underclass participants felt abandoned by the withdrawal of their former activist allies from street action. It is possible that, had the movement continued in some form, the riots might have turned out differently—as a point of departure for another wave of collective struggle, rather than the desperate act of a marginalized population rising ruinously against society itself.



## Be prepared for burnout and depression.

After the crest, when the euphoria is over, many participants will experience depression. Since the events that regularly brought them together have ceased, they are isolated and more vulnerable. Others may veer into addiction: substance use can be a way to maintain intimacy with each other and with danger itself when there is no more fire in the streets. The simple pleasures with which people celebrated their victories can expand to fill the space left by the receding tide of events, becoming self-destructive. This is another reason to establish new venues to maintain camaraderie and connection when the window of possibility is closing.

## Save energy for the fallout.

All of these problems are often intensified by the explosion of discord that usually follows a movement's demise. Once it is clear that a movement is definitively over, all the conflicts that the participants have been putting off come to the fore, for there is no longer any incentive to keep them under the rug. Suppressed resentments and ideological differences surface, along with serious allegations about abuse of power and violations of consent. Learning from these conflicts is an essential part of the process that prepares the way for future movements: for example, contemporary anarchism is descended in part from the feminist backlash that followed the New Left movements of the 1960s. But participants rarely think to save energy for this phase, and it can feel like thankless work, since the "action" is ostensibly over.

It was a few nights before the eviction of the Occupy Philly encampment, and we were holding a General Assembly to decide what to do. Tensions were running high between the residents of the camp, who were primarily homeless, and those who participated chiefly in meetings and working groups. That night, a homeless man interrupted the GA to accuse several of those in leadership positions of being in league with the police, being racist, and planning to sell out the homeless. The facilitator tried to ignore the disruption, but the angry man drowned him out and eventually riled up a few more people who began shouting too. In this moment of chaos and heightened emotion, we had a unique opportunity. We could have shifted our focus from the threat that the government wanted us to react to, instead using that GA to





finally address the tensions in our own group in hopes of building a force that could survive into the next phase of struggle. Instead, the facilitator tried to restore order by directing us to "break into small groups and discuss what 'respect' means." My heart sank. Our shared energy was explosive; we needed to channel it, not suppress it.

That was the last time I saw many of the comrades I'd befriended over the preceding months. The eviction wasn't the greatest threat we faced after all.

## Repression hits hardest at the end.

Government repression usually does not hit in full force until after a movement has died down. It is most convenient for the state to attack people when their support networks have collapsed and their attention is elsewhere—or at least when the limits of their social leverage and popularity have become clear. Operation Backfire struck years after the high point of Earth Liberation Front momentum\*, when many of the participants had moved on and the communities that had supported them had disintegrated. Similarly, the authorities waited until May 2012 to strike back at Occupy with a series of entrapment cases.

The chief goal of repression is to open the fault lines within the targeted social body, isolating it and forcing it into a reactive position. Ideally, we should respond to repression in ways that establish new connections and position us for new offensives.

\* See *Rolling Thunder* #5.

## Hold your ground.

How do we transition into other forms of connection when the exceptional circumstances that drew us together are over? The networks that coalesce effortlessly during the high point of momentum rarely survive. While new events were unfolding, there was an obvious reward for setting differences aside and interrupting routines to converge. Afterwards, the large groups that formed slowly break down into smaller ones, while smaller groups often vanish altogether. The reshuffling of allegiances that takes place during this period is vital, but it's equally vital not to lose each other in the shuffle.

During the crest of a movement, participants often take for granted that it will leave them at a higher plateau when it is over. But this is hardly guaranteed. This may be the most important question facing us as we approach the next wave of struggles: how do we gain and hold ground? Political parties can measure their effectiveness according to how many new recruits they retain, but anarchists must conceive of success differently.

In the end, it isn't just organizations with contact lists that will remain after the crest, but above all new questions, new practices, new points of reference for how people can stand up for themselves. Passing these memories along to the next generation is one of the most important things we can do.

### Further Reading

*Cracking under Pressure: Narrating the Decline of the Amsterdam Squatters' Movement*, by Lynn Owens

AFTER THE CREST, CASE STUDY:



# The Rise and Fall of the Oakland Commune





*The Commune at Oscar Grant Plaza on day five—October 15, 2011.*

## The Rapid Ascent

In setting ourselves the sobering task of narrating the decline of Occupy Oakland, we are at least spared any argument about when the high point took place. There might be disagreement about whether the “general strike” of November 2, 2011 deserved that title, but no one would dispute that it was the high-water mark of the local movement and a turning point in the Occupy sequence unfolding across the country.

At that moment, describing Occupy Oakland as the *Oakland Commune* was not just an exaggeration. For a short time, we really were a collective force with the ambition and capacity to transform the whole city and radicalize the national movement. The experience of that day has stayed with many of us, a brief and chaotic glimpse of insurrectionary horizons that closed as quickly as they opened. Remembering this as we go about our daily lives under capitalism has been enormously painful; for many of us in the Bay Area, the last year and a half has been a process of grieving the loss of that moment.

This grief was present in all the successive stages of that political sequence. Although the movement continued for months, bringing out thousands of people for explosive days of action, none of the later moments—December 12, January 28, or May 1—even remotely compare to November 2.

Before we can analyze the Oakland Commune’s decline, we have to understand its rise and the various projects in the Bay that helped to foster it. The following narrative is not meant as a total account of all of the elements that combined to form the Oakland Commune, but rather the ones we experienced firsthand.

During the spring of 2011, with a backdrop including the Arab Spring, the European “movement of the squares,” and its faint echo in the Wisconsin capitol occupation, comrades in the Bay Area began a slow process of reconstituting themselves as a force in the streets. This followed an extended period of decomposition and aimlessness. Many of us expected that the wave of unrest sweeping the globe would reach the US eventually, and we wanted to be prepared. That summer, the Bay Area



witnessed a series of small but fierce and creative demonstrations. From the native encampment protecting Glen Cove against suburban development in Vallejo to the riotous protests in San Francisco after police gunned down Kenneth Harding when he avoided a transit fare check, the summer provided several opportunities for radicals from a range of communities to work together.

During June and July, a mix of anti-state communists and insurrectionary anarchists organized a series of anti-austerity actions dubbed Anticuts that got people into the streets to experiment with new tactics and forms of social intervention. These were intended to map out the local terrain of struggle and the various antagonistic social constellations that might participate in future rebellions. Through these small and sometimes frustrating excursions, new march routes and ways to understand the geography of downtown Oakland emerged. For instance, the third and final Anticut action—organized in solidarity with a hunger strike in California prisons—marched from the future home of Occupy Oakland in Frank Ogawa Plaza down Broadway past the police headquarters, courthouse, and jail, holding a noise demo there before circling back towards the plaza to disperse. This small demonstration marked the first time this loop was tried. Months later, during the high-tension moments of Occupy Oakland, that march route became intimately familiar to thousands of people, sometimes repeated multiple times per day.

The rhythm of small and medium-sized demonstrations such as the Anonymous actions against BART police and the one-day occupation of UC Berkeley's Tolman Hall continued throughout the summer and early fall. But it wasn't until momentum began to build nationally after the establishment of the Zucotti Park camp on Wall Street—September 17, 2011—that the full potential of the relationships built over the summer could blossom. Oakland joined the national movement late, on October 10, immediately establishing a sprawling camp in the plaza in front of City Hall—renamed Oscar Grant Plaza, after the young Black man murdered by BART police in 2009. This became a liberated zone, off-limits to police and politicians and organized according to principles of self-organization, free access to food and supplies, open participation in all aspects of camp life, and autonomous action.

In hindsight, it is striking how quickly Occupy Oakland emerged, matured, and reached its peak. Only two weeks separate the beginning of the camp from the first police raid in the early hours of October 25. After the Commune repeatedly resisted

attempts by the city administration to assert control over the camp—staging public burnings of warning letters during general assemblies in the amphitheater on the steps of city hall—Mayor Jean Quan authorized the militarized police operation that left the camp in ruins and over 100 in jail.

Later that same day, thousands of enraged people poured back into downtown, charging police barricades around the plaza and braving countless barrages of tear gas and projectiles until the early hours of the morning. Partly because of the near murder of Iraq War veteran Scott Olsen by a police projectile that night and the dramatic footage of the entire downtown area covered in gas, the next day the police withdrew in a storm of controversy. Exultant crowds reoccupied the plaza, holding an assembly of 2000 people—the largest of the whole sequence—and agreed to go on the offensive with the November 2 strike. The fact that it seemed possible to organize a general strike in a single week indicates the degree to which normal calendar time warped and stretched over those first three weeks. During the Oakland Commune's incredibly rapid yet brief ascent, there seemed to be no limit on what could happen in a week, a day, an hour.

It all came to a head on November 2. Looking back, the scope of that day remains impressive. In less than 24 hours, the strike unleashed all the tactics explored during the entire Occupy Oakland sequence. Flying



*The kitchen during the first week of Occupy Oakland.*

pickets, work actions, marches, blockades, occupations, and moments of riotous destruction brought as many as 50,000 people to downtown Oakland, many of whom were participating in disruptive acts for the first time.

People gathered in the early morning under a giant banner, stretched across the central intersection in downtown, reading "Death to Capitalism."



From there, the crowds quickly fanned out across the center of the city, shutting down businesses that had refused to close for the day. The camp at the plaza became a crowded anti-capitalist carnival offering music and speeches from three different stages. By early afternoon, as thousands filled the streets, an anti-capitalist march led by a large black bloc smashed its way through downtown, leaving broken windows and graffiti on banks and corporations in its wake. Within a few hours, tens of thousands of people marched on the port of Oakland, shutting down all operations at its various terminals. Finally, as night fell, hundreds of people joyfully occupied the aptly-named Traveler's Aid building a few blocks from the plaza; long empty, it had formerly housed a nonprofit serving the homeless. Within an hour, however, riot police attacked and evicted the new occupation, provoking a night of rioting during which people wrecked most of the businesses and city offices around the plaza, including a police substation.

We were in the middle of something without recent precedent in the US. And yet the day was just a day. There was no continuation, no sense of what might come next. The following morning, after three weeks of great weather, the first rains of the season fell and the camp lay quiet, foreshadowing the dispirited mood of the months to come. The fallout from the previous day's anti-capitalist march and the more indiscriminate rioting later in the night was intense, as various liberal elements took the opportunity to demonize anarchists and the black bloc, calling for vigilante patrols by pacifists and initiating a reactionary backlash that caused many anarchists and radicals to steer clear of the camp for a few days. The mood shifted from elation to demoralization very quickly, especially given the failure of the occupation of the Traveler's Aid building, which might have opened up new horizons for the Oakland Commune. It was difficult to recognize this at the time, but we had already encountered the fundamental limits of this sequence of struggle. The slow decline had begun.

## Days of Action, Horizons of Struggle

Arguably, the decline had been set in motion in the days immediately before the strike. Up until the raid on October 25, the power of the Oakland Commune lay in the camp itself: in collective activities that linked each day in the liberated plaza with the next, building momentum through consistent interaction around questions of survival rather than activism. When over 600 riot police fired tear gas and flash-bang grenades as they broke through the barricades protecting Oscar Grant Plaza in the dark morning hours of October 25, they were not only attempting to evict the camp, but to break apart the continuity of the tenuous community that we had formed.

This first eviction backfired on them spectacularly. The crowds came back even bigger and called for the November 2 strike—a timely and effective decision. But it also marked the first moment when the energy of the Commune shifted from the daily process of holding liberated space to a strategy built around discrete “days of action.” The day in question was only one week away, and the buildup to it ran parallel with the reconstitution of the camp. But with the historic decision to strike, there was a shift away from the reproduction and expansion of the original oppositional zone. Something was lost in this transition.

The consistent process of eating, sleeping, and organizing with many others in a liberated zone at the heart of a struggling North American city had proved to be a challenge for which few were prepared. At times, the Commune was a veritable inferno—a place of fistfights, constant emergencies, injury, illness, miscommunication, and stress. At other moments, it offered a kind of freedom and beauty unlike anything else. There were times when each person seemed full of limitless creativity, compassion, and dedication, matched by hatred of capitalism and the state. We could see the experience changing people day by day, hour by hour, and we could feel it changing us. The camp was a place of joy, laughter, and

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care, almost psychedelic in the confusion it provided to the senses. But mostly, it was a place that teetered on the edge of breakdown, a place in which none of the usual buffers and mediations that mask the daily violence of contemporary America were present. All the misogyny, homophobia, racism, and other poisonous dynamics that form the foundations of capitalist society rose to the surface in this liberated zone, challenging the Commune's ability to sustain itself. We were ill-prepared for the problems the camp raised, though people made heroic attempts to respond to each new emergency.

For this reason, many comrades welcomed the first police raid in hopes that direct conflict with the state would breathe new life into a struggle slowly dying of internal causes. After the raid, people could focus their attention outward in offensive actions like the general strike, away from the overwhelming difficulties of the camp.

The decision to strike was not a mistake. On the contrary, it was one of the better decisions collectively made during the entire sequence. But it inaugurated a half-year period defined increasingly by days of action called for by the general assembly rather than the rhythms of shared experience. This process accelerated after the second eviction of the camp on November 14 and reached its terminal point with the late January call for another general strike on May 1—a strike that never materialized. May Day 2012 ended up being an exciting day of action, but it paled in comparison to the November 2 strike, which had been organized in only a week. The more that the Oakland Commune lost its footing, momentum, and sense of direction, the more it relied on arbitrarily chosen days of action that were increasingly few and far between.

In the shift away from the camp towards spectacular offensives, the actions of November 2 opened up three horizons of struggle, each of which hit a wall over the following months. In many regards, the limits of these approaches were already apparent during the strike.

First, there were the tens of thousands who laid siege to the port. Most would agree that the high point of the day—the action that had the most impact on capitalism and the local power structure—was this blockade of the port of Oakland. However, the success of that action empowered one tendency within the movement to push the struggle away from reclaiming space and disrupting the flows of capital toward a kind of trade union superactivism that later proved to be a dead end.

Secondly, there was the attempt, later in the evening, to occupy the Traveler's Aid building. But when

riot police besieged the building, the participants failed to put up any meaningful defense. It was one thing to occupy public parks and plazas—but another thing to breach the sacred barriers of private property. Comrades had been discussing that trajectory from the beginning, but the failure of the Traveler's Aid attempt indicated that it might remain an unsurpassable horizon.



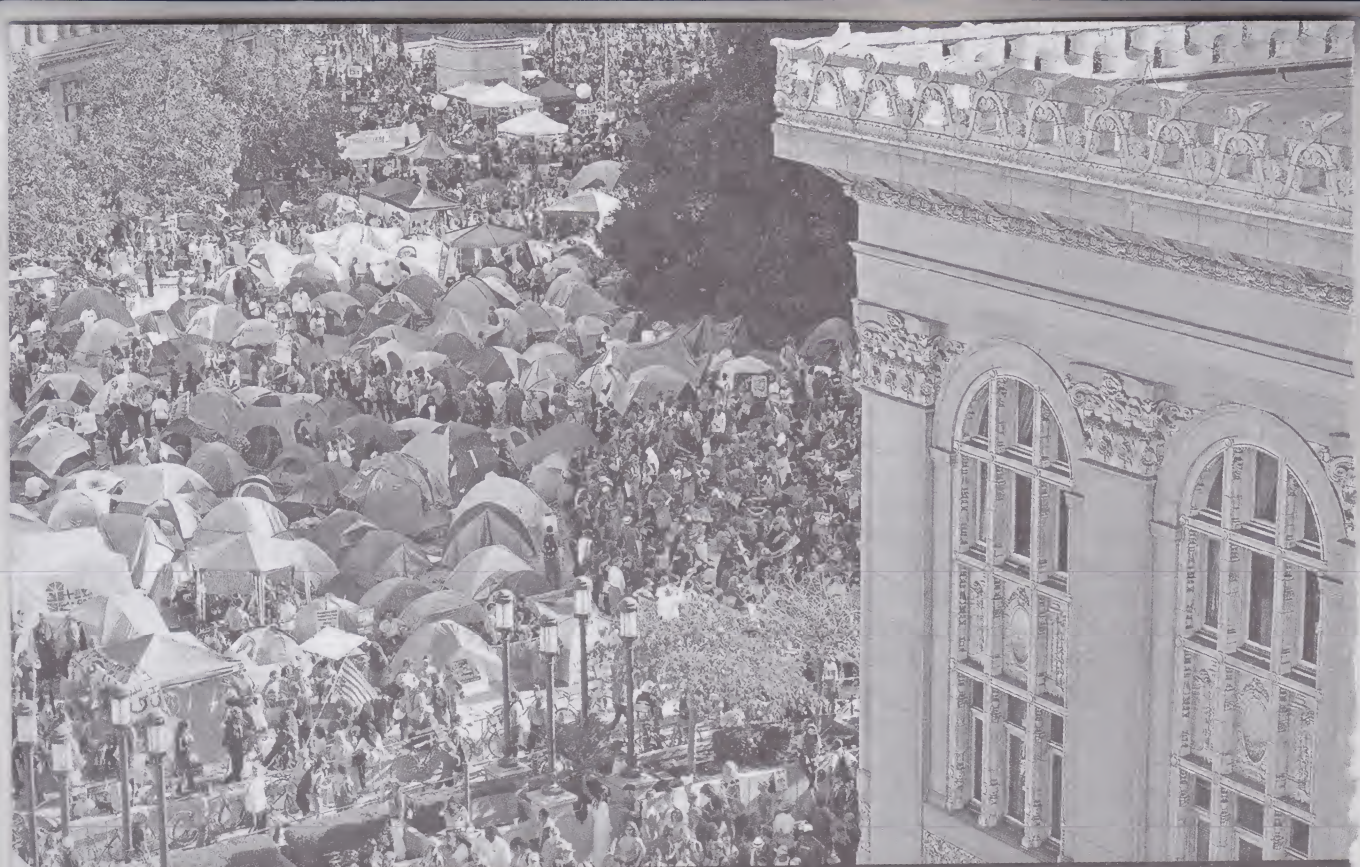
*The camp in ruins after the October 25 early morning police raid.*



*Tear gas fills downtown streets during clashes in the evening of October 25 as thousands try to take back the plaza.*

Finally, there was street fighting and the black bloc. This represented the dream of continuous escalation, in which a proactive offensive of black-clad rioters would usher in a new phase of increasingly widespread militant rebellion, culminating in a full-on uprising. Certainly, November 2 saw some of the most intense street conflicts up to that point, epitomized by the appearance of a large black bloc during the afternoon anti-capitalist march. Yet that night, when riot police were finally ordered to reassert control of downtown Oakland and evict the





*Oscar Grant Plaza is transformed into an anti-capitalist festival during the November 2 strike.*

*A banner is strung across 14th and Broadway, the central intersection of downtown Oakland at the corner of the plaza, during the November 2 strike.*





newly occupied building, this increased street militancy meant little. Police scattered the participants like a bowling ball plowing into a wedge of pins.

Few people were organized into affinity groups capable of acting intelligently and decisively in the face of the highly trained and physically intimidating Oakland police. Inexperienced rioters had the tendency to attack weakly and prematurely, then scatter when the police counter-attacked. In addition, the presence of vigilante pacifist members of Occupy—whose violent assertion of nonviolence underscored the paradox of their position—and amateur journalists too busy photographing the riot to help their ostensible comrades both produced confusion and dissension. As is often the case in the US, comrades were able to carry out attacks on property with relative ease, adopting an effective hit-and-run strategy. But when it came to standing ground or mounting an offensive against the police, the street fighters were rarely effective.

## The New Year

After the camp was cleared during the second police raid of the plaza on November 14, many comrades continued along each of these three trajectories, moving ever farther from the camp that had brought them together in the first place.

The labor solidarity wing of the movement, born during the November 2 port blockade, increasingly viewed Occupy as a vehicle for supporting unions and intervening in existing workers' disputes. On December 12, this faction led a day of action to shut down ports across the West Coast (as well as in other scattered locations such as a Walmart distribution center in Colorado). This had been called for in response to the wave of repression and camp evictions across the country in late November and early December, as well as in solidarity with the struggle of longshoremen in Longview, WA against the efforts of the multinational corporation EGT to break their union, the ILWU. While not entirely successful, the day was still impressive, demonstrating the continuing power of Occupy. As 2012 began, this labor solidarity wing of the movement was busy spearheading a regional mobilization to disrupt the first scab ship scheduled to dock at the EGT facilities in Longview. Many comrades from the Bay planned to converge on Longview in what looked to be an important showdown.

Elsewhere, an alliance of insurrectionaries and comrades from a wide range of working groups that had sustained the camp were organizing another offensive. Regrouping from the failure of the Traveler's

Aid occupation, they had called for a massive day of action on January 28, 2012 to occupy a large undisclosed building. This was to become a new hub for the Oakland Commune.

Finally, there was the assortment of radicals and rebels who continuously struggled to hold down Oscar Grant Plaza itself. Some of them had slept on benches in the plaza long before Occupy; some were young locals politicized over the previous months; others hailed from a range of eccentric Bay Area groupings



*Tens of thousands march towards the port of Oakland during the November 2 strike.*

including a contingent of juggalos. The plaza was still contested turf with regular general assemblies, events, and a 24-hour "vigil" that held space, served food, and provided a social venue. The park and empty lot a few blocks away in the gentrifying Uptown district at 19<sup>th</sup> and Telegraph had also become a second front, following a brief occupation there on November 19 that ripped down the surrounding fences and established a camp before being quickly evicted.

This was the political climate in Oakland on New Year's Eve, as a spirited march left from the plaza for a noise demo. The crowd followed the now familiar loop from the plaza to the police headquarters, courthouse, and jail, where people unleashed a torrent of fireworks before returning to the plaza for a raucous dance party. With hundreds attending, it was a powerful demonstration that even without the camp, the Commune could still call the plaza home. It was also a celebration of the struggles to come and the next major wave of the Occupy movement, which many believed to be just around the corner. In those early celebratory hours of 2012, it was nearly impossible to grasp how quickly all of these possible trajectories would hit walls. But in January, the limits that first became apparent on November 2 became debilitating, ushering in the terminal phase of the movement.



Oscar Grant Plaza was first to go. Running scuffles between the ragtag rebels of the plaza and platoons of cops looking to scare them off had increased throughout December, becoming a daily occurrence by the final week of the year. Dozens were arrested. In contrast to previous mass arrest situations, the cops and DA were clearly looking to make examples of the arrestees, who were slapped with large bails, felony charges, and a new favorite tactic of repression: stay-away orders that threatened people with additional jail time if they returned to downtown Oakland. While not as spectacular as police indiscriminately tear-gassing and spraying crowds with projectiles, the most brutal and effective repression of the whole Occupy Oakland sequence arguably occurred during the turf war over the plaza at the turn of the year. Because so many comrades were focused on organizing for the upcoming days of action, those facing the cops and courts in the plaza were isolated, without the support they needed.

Inspired by the success of the New Year's Eve noise demo and hoping to respond to the escalating repression, the Tactical Action Committee—a militant group composed primarily of young Black men from Oakland who had been busy defending the plaza and organizing other actions—called for the first FTP (Fuck the Police) march one week later, on January 7. On January 4, after a general assembly in the plaza ended and the majority of people went home, a militarized raid involving dozens of riot police successfully evicted the vigil. This was the third and final raid of Oscar Grant Plaza. A member of TAC was among those arrested in the operation. The rebel presence in the plaza had been successfully removed, and the upcoming FTP march took on increasing significance.

Nearly three hundred gathered at the corner of the Plaza at 14<sup>th</sup> and Broadway on the evening of January 7. Many were masked up and ready for a fight, feeling that this was the moment to present a coordinated militant response to the successive evictions of the Commune. Led by a massive "Fuck the Police" banner, the march took off once again down Broadway on the loop past police headquarters and the jail. Clashes erupted near the headquarters as a police cruiser was attacked, bottles were thrown, a small fire was lit in the street, and lines of riot police repeatedly charged the crowd.

Yet once again, the displays of militancy were just that, displays—ineffective when it came to defending comrades. Fighters were able to get in a few hits on police, but quickly retreated and fled out of downtown in the face of the OPD offensive. Arguing erupted among comrades, as it became clear

that the eagerness with which many went on the attack was not matched by any kind of organized defense or coordinated crowd movement. As comrades scattered, leaving the plaza abandoned once again, another wave of arrests ensued with police units picking off isolated street fighters who had been identified by undercover in the crowd. As with the wave of arrests around the plaza over the previous weeks, the people arrested at this first FTP march bore some of the heaviest penalties of the whole sequence, with some comrades eventually doing significant jail time.

The first FTP march failed to reverse the rapid decline of the Commune or reassert the movement's presence downtown. On the contrary, it accelerated this decline, signaling to the state that it was now clearly gaining the advantage. This was not the fault of TAC, who continued to hold weekly FTP marches over the following months that were usually less confrontational. Rather, it showed the limits of the uncoordinated and tactically ineffective displays of street militancy mustered by the black blocs of that period. At the time, this series of painful defeats failed to register to many comrades as a serious blow to the movement, even though the authorities had successfully swept the plaza clean and neutralized the attempt to mount a response. Many people were distracted, with their sights set on the upcoming days of action. In retrospect, the new year was clearly off to a bad start.

Planning continued for the convergence in Longview and the January 28 day of action. General assemblies decreased in size and regularity but continued to meet, increasingly retreating to the park at 19<sup>th</sup> and Telegraph since an increasing number of comrades were prohibited from the Plaza by stay-away orders. The source of the Commune's power, the defiant public occupation of space, was quickly drying up, though the upcoming offensives gave many comrades the sense that another wave of momentum was imminent.

This delusion was shaken when the bureaucrats at the top of the ILWU outmaneuvered the planned blockade of the scab ship in Longview, and all plans for the convergence imploded. Occupy caravans had been organized from Oakland, Portland, Seattle, and elsewhere, while the federal government announced it would defend the scab ship with a Coast Guard cutter. Comrades from across the West Coast were just waiting for word from those working directly with the Longview Longshoremen to initiate a confrontational showdown. But in their determination to reorient Occupy towards labor activism, the tendency that had coalesced during

# ALL OF THESE EFFORTS WERE STILL RIDING ON EVAPORATING MOMENTUM FROM THE PREVIOUS FALL. IN THEIR INCREASING DETACHMENT FROM EACH OTHER, THEY REPRESENTED THE LONG PROCESS OF DISPERSAL AND DECOMPOSITION THAT BEGAN WITH THE STRIKE ON NOVEMBER 2.

the November 2 port blockade had constructed a framework that was completely disconnected from the streets and plazas from which they had emerged. With every step from the November 2 strike through the December West Coast port blockade and towards Longview, these actions ceased to be participatory disruptions in the international flows of capital as a projection of the occupation's power beyond the plaza. Instead, they became solidarity actions, organized only with supporting the union in mind. There was naïve talk about the actions sparking a wildcat strike in the ports, or prying the union away from the bureaucrats who were eager to diffuse the conflict and cooperate with EGT. But none of this came close to materializing.

In the end, the labor solidarity tendency within Occupy Oakland and the handful of radical Longshoremen allies were no match for the political machinations of those at the top of the ILWU, who coerced the rank and file of Longview to accept a compromise with EGT that kept them on the job while stripping them of many benefits and their job security. This was enough to ease the tension and avert the showdown. On January 27, as the last-minute plans for the following day's attempt to occupy a building were finalized, a confusing statement emerged from the caravan organizers, announcing that the Longview workers had accepted a contract and that this was—in some unspecified way—a victory. This was how the port campaign ended: not with a bang, but a whimper.

The next morning, the final offensive of January kicked into action. Though in many regards it was the most significant day since the general strike, the planned January 28 (J28) building occupation was fundamentally an arbitrarily chosen day of action with all the limits thereof. However, unlike the port actions, this was a massive attempt to return to what had made the Oakland Commune so powerful in the first place: liberating space from capital and the state, transforming it into a collective occupation where people could take care of each other and organize

further actions. Even though many remember that spectacular day as one of the most important in their experience as part of the Oakland Commune, in relation to its stated goal, it was a disaster.

In response to criticism of the clandestinely organized occupation of the Traveler's Aid building on November 2, J28 was organized in a radically open structure. Regular "Move-In Assemblies" of over 100 met publicly in the plaza to plan the occupation, while giving a smaller closed group the mandate to pick a building in relative secrecy. This assembly spent countless days organizing infrastructure for the new occupation, setting up guidelines for accountability within the space and planning a multi-day festival of music, speakers, and films. As the day of action unfolded, this ambitious plan was blasted apart in the first spectacular clashes outside the target building—the massive Kaiser Center Auditorium—in what became known as "the Battle of Oak Street." It was probably because people believed so strongly in the dream that a new liberated space could emerge from the Kaiser Center and resuscitate the Commune that they fought so hard and with such a collective spirit that day. But OPD had no qualms about transforming downtown into a warzone to ensure that private property remained off-limits.

A backup plan later in the day also failed to seize a building. As night fell, OPD called in additional police forces from across the Bay Area. After their first attempt to kettle a march of nearly a thousand people at 19<sup>th</sup> and Telegraph was outmaneuvered—the crowd dramatically escaped by tearing down the fences the city had recently rebuilt—the police finally succeeded in surrounding over 400 comrades outside the downtown YMCA. The arrestees spent the following days in filthy overcrowded cells at Santa Rita Jail.

Amazingly, those who remained on the streets were undaunted. They broke into City Hall, burning the American flag and vandalizing the inside of the building in revenge for the police repression. Even after riot police with shotguns chased them off, the





*The final night of the vigil at the plaza, hours before the police raid of January 4.*





night was still not over. An FTP march was quickly organized. In keeping with tradition, participants took the familiar loop through downtown and unleashed rocks, bottles, and other objects at the police station and jail as they passed. The Commune was not going down without a fight.

Yet that was the end. The limits had emerged one by one over the course of January, and there was no new occupation or wave of mobilizations on the way. On January 29, as comrades scrambled to support the hundreds in jail while thousands across the country organized solidarity demonstrations with Oakland, over 300 gathered at the plaza in what turned out to be the last large general assembly. They voted enthusiastically to endorse calls emerging from New York and elsewhere for a May 1 global general strike—a strike that never materialized. Many still hoped that Occupy would reemerge

while a struggle over an occupied farm emerged in neighboring Albany. Foreclosure defense campaigns successfully held off a series of evictions. For a week, people occupied an Oakland public school that was being closed down.

Yet the chance to regain momentum had passed in January. All of these efforts were still riding on evaporating momentum from the previous fall. In their increasing detachment from each other, they represented the long process of dispersal and decomposition that began with the strike on November 2.

## Camp and Commune

At its core, Occupy was about occupying. In Oakland and elsewhere, it was about producing a form of life defined by mutual aid, self-organization, and autonomous action. It was about defending spaces free from police, politicians, and bosses, and the necessarily violent conflict between those zones and the surrounding capitalist world on which the camps nonetheless depended. Oakland took this about as far as it could go within the framework of Occupy, establishing a zone that fed and sheltered hundreds of people each day—sometimes thousands—in brazen defiance of the city officials fifty yards away in City Hall and the cops leering from the periphery. For all the hype about social media, livestreaming, and other information technologies enabling this new wave of revolt, the grounding of the struggle in the face-to-face relationships that combined to form the occupation is clearly what gave Occupy its unique potential and created the material foundation for all the political possibilities of the movement. The authorities understood this. That's why they cleared the camps in Oakland and everywhere else, using as much force as necessary to prevent reoccupation.

Once the camp was cleared, the Oakland Commune became a husk deprived of its central tactic and, arguably, its reason for being. This was the reason why the vigil clung mournfully to the plaza despite repeated battering by OPD. It was the reason why the decision was made to claim a building for the movement on January 28. It was why the planning for an autonomous occupation provided the initial impetus for the convergence of feminist and queer comrades in what would later become Occupy Patriarchy. Without something to take the place of what had been lost with the camp, there was little chance that we would regain the expansive prospects of the fall.

The strength of "the camp form" was its ability to carve out material zones of political antagonism



*Comrades flee from charging lines of riot police during the first FTP march, January 7.*

with a spring offensive. But given the bitter defeat in the turf war over the plaza, the implosion of the port blockade campaign, and the failure to secure a new home for the Commune, this seemed unlikely. January was the end. Occupy's window of radical possibilities would soon be closed in Oakland and everywhere else.

Over the following months, people carried out many amazing and inspiring radical projects. Occupy Oakland organized a series of large neighborhood BBQs in the city. The anti-repression committee set an impressive standard for how to take care of arrestees and imprisoned comrades. The SF Commune temporarily held a building at 888 Turk. Insurgent feminist and queer comrades who had come together over the previous months continued a campaign of actions and interventions while writing and distributing propaganda and texts. Clashes and attacks temporarily erupted across the Bay around May Day,



*Police open fire on the crowd during the battle of Oak Street, January 28.*

that were not organized around petitioning the authorities for concessions through symbolic demonstration but directly providing for our daily needs through the repurposing and reclamation of urban space. This was one of the most appealing aspects of the camp: it offered the opportunity to explore ways of relating and surviving together that did not rely on the usual mechanisms—money, the state, police, predefined social hierarchies and categories—though the banishment of those things was always partial and provisional at best. This enabled the participants to bypass some of the more tedious ways in which activists develop political projects, equipping people to organize around their own survival, in their own cities, on the basis of their personal experience of oppression and need, rather than according to essentially moral objections to this or that injustice. In the context of this contagious form of revolt spreading through the communal liberation of space, the movement's rejection of the need to issue any specific demands to authorities made perfect sense. Occupy's power came from the proliferation and reproduction of these oppositional zones, not from its political sway.

But if the camp was the source of our strength, it was also the source of the limits we reached, and not only because without it there was no real future for Occupy. At root, the camp was inadequate to the project of finding ways to live together beyond the

specious forms of community that capitalism provides. In fact, the Oakland camp was already in a state of degeneration by the time it was cleared, and probably would have broken down on its own eventually.

The camp was no more violent or miserable than the city of Oakland is on any given day. Yet the level of everyday misery, alienation, and abuse that makes up the mundane reality of capitalist society is truly staggering, especially when concentrated in a plot of grass in the middle of an impoverished city. When we liberate urban space in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, we have no choice but to confront the devastation produced by centuries of capitalism, conquest, and domination.

Inside the reclaimed space opened up by the Commune, rampant interpersonal conflicts and forms of structural violence could not be contained or managed in the ways that capitalism normally does, through the violence of the police, the institutions of the state, or the ready-to-hand hierarchies provided by money and commodities. We had to confront these problems collectively and directly. But to do so adequately would have required the expropriation of resources and space far beyond what was within the grasp of the nascent movement. It also would have required the audacious dedication of participants to transcend their atomized lives and constructed identities under capitalism, going past the point of no return. The failure to overcome these



fundamental obstacles enabled power relationships built on patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity to reassert their dominance within the movement while undermining and repressing the vital new relationships that had emerged through the process of struggle. These were the underlying limits that led the Commune away from the reclamation

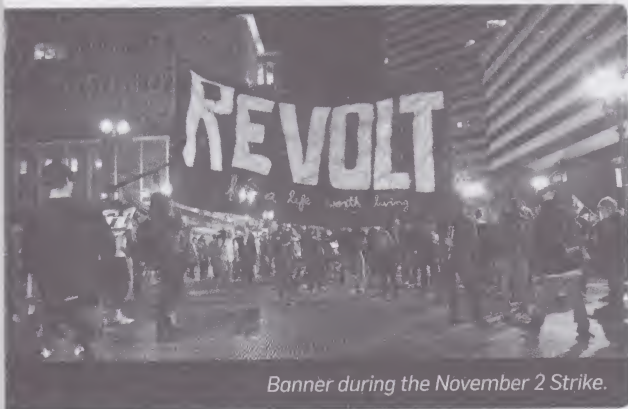
that could serve as hubs for organizing offensives and sustain all kinds of self-organization and care; occupations of schools and workplaces. These were the horizons that the Oakland Commune illuminated, in the positive sense, despite its limits. We believe it is likely that future struggles in the US will follow this trajectory in some way, using Occupy's attempted offensives and space reclamations as the foundation upon which something much larger, more beautiful and more ferocious can begin to take shape.

But the questions still remain: what would it mean to actually take care of each other and to collectively sustain and nurture an unstoppable insurrectionary struggle? How can we dismantle and negate the oppressive power relationships and toxic interpersonal dynamics we carry with us into liberated spaces? How can we make room for the myriad of revolts within the revolt that are necessary to upend all forms of domination? The effectiveness of any future antagonistic projects in the U.S. will be determined by our ability to answer these questions and thus transcend the limits that were so debilitating within Oscar Grant Plaza, forcing the Commune away from the very source of its power.

Another wave of struggle and unrest will undoubtedly explode in our streets and plazas sooner or later. Our task in the meantime is to cultivate fierce and creative forms of cooperating, caring for each other, and fighting together that can help us smash through the fundamental limits of contemporary revolt when the time is right. If we can make substantial strides beyond these obstacles, police attacks and jail sentences will be no match for the uncontrollable momentum of our collective force.

*Some Oakland Antagonists,  
August 2013*

THE OAKLAND COMMUNE TOOK THE OCCUPY OAKLAND CAMP AS A POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR A BARELY-REALIZED PROJECT OF RECLAMATION, AUTONOMY, AND THE DISRUPTION OF CAPITALISM ON A MUCH WIDER BASIS. ITS FAILED OFFENSIVES ILLUMINATED THE HORIZONS THAT FUTURE STRUGGLES IN THE UNITED STATES WILL HAVE TO SURPASS.



*Banner during the November 2 Strike.*

of space that had provided the basis for its initial rapid ascent, and ushered in its six month decline, passing the point of no return as the horizons of struggle that led away from the camp hit dead ends in January 2012.

This is the double bind we found ourselves in: the camp was both inadequate and essential. A potential solution to this bind is contained in the concept of the Commune, by which we mean the projected translation of the principles of the camp onto a new, more expansive footing. Occupy Oakland became the Oakland Commune once it took the camp as the model for a project (barely realized) of reclamation, autonomy, and the disruption of capital on a much wider basis: neighborhood assemblies reclaiming abandoned buildings for their needs; social centers





*Barricades in downtown Oakland following the November 2 General Strike.*

*Comrades respond to the police attack by throwing chairs and other objects at police lines during The Battle of Oak Street, January 28.*







AFTER THE CREST, CASE STUDY:

# MONTREAL: PEAKS AND PRECIPICES





# STUDENT STRIKE AND SOCIAL REVOLT IN QUÉBEC, 2012



This is a personal reflection on anarchist participation in the 2012 student strike in Montréal and the disruptions that accompanied it. The product of much collective discussion, this article explores the opportunities anarchists missed during the high point of the conflict by limiting themselves to the framework of the strike, and the risks they incurred by attempting to maintain it once it had entered a reformist endgame.

## FORESEEING EVENTS

Anarchists should hone our skills at anticipating social upheavals.\*

Sometimes, such events can be seen coming far in advance, offering us the chance to prepare in order to surpass the limitations of the organizations, discourse, and default tactics that are likely to characterize them. That was the case in Montréal in the summer of 2011, by which time it was perfectly clear that a student strike was on the way. By the middle of summer, it was widely known that the major student federations, ASSÉ, FÉCQ, and FÉUQ, were collaborating for a massive demonstration on November 10. This demonstration was conceived as presenting the Liberal government with an ultimatum before the movement resorted to an unlimited general strike. Earlier in 2011, the occupation of the capitol building in Madison, Wisconsin, had taken me and many other anarchists across the continent by surprise.

\* Of course, upheavals are unpredictable. In Montréal and elsewhere, we have seen that whenever the police kill someone, it can spark riots. These sorts of upheavals are often led only by marginalized youth—and all too often, as with the riots that started in the London neighborhood of Tottenham in 2011, anarchists fail to contribute in any meaningful way.

In Montréal, on the other hand, we had advance warning of things to come; it was clear to some of us that we could make strategic use of this knowledge.

A correct analysis of any situation, combined with reflection on one's own objectives, should suggest a strategy with which to proceed.<sup>†</sup> But how do we refine our analytical skills? I don't want to reduce this to *experience*; plenty of "veterans" analyze situations badly, routinely making the same mistakes. In Montréal, that camp includes those who fetishize direct democracy, certain types of collective process, and the global justice movement that peaked here in the mobilization against the 2001 Summit of the Americas in Québec City. Québécois insurrectionists tend to dismiss that crowd—perhaps too hastily—as being

<sup>†</sup> The problem of strategy in chess is the problem of determining the best way to checkmate your opponent. The problem of strategy for anarchists is more complicated, because we don't necessarily agree as to what we are trying to achieve—but there are a few things we should be able to agree upon, such as abolishing police, prisons, and borders. Whatever our goals, strategy is how we attempt to reach them. Speaking of a correct analysis, then, has little to do with a lofty concept like Truth, which is supposedly final. No analysis is correct forever; no analysis is correct outside the context in which it serves. For anarchists, who wish to bring about a revolution, a correct analysis is simply whatever interpretation of social reality best informs our efforts to achieve that objective.

## T I M E L I N E

**February 13, 2012** After many months of ultimatums to the government, mobilization on university and cégep campuses, and occasional actions and demonstrations, the student strike officially begins with a few departments at Université Laval in Québec City. From there, it spreads rapidly. Spring has come early.

**February 16** The student association of Cégep du Vieux Montréal votes to go on strike; the school is occupied. Late in the night, police enter the school and break up the occupation.

**March 15** After weeks of escalating violence on the part of the police, including an incident in which a cégep student lost his eye to a concussion grenade, the COBP's annual demonstration against police brutality begins at Berri Square; the crowd that gathers is significantly larger than at any other time in the history of the event, and a night riot ensues. Although many participants escape, over 226 are arrested.

**March 22** The largest demonstration of the strike thus far is an ultimatum from the Coalition large de l'Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (CLASSE) to the Liberal government in Québec City: repeal your planned tuition

hike, or we will begin a campaign of economic disruption. Although actions to this effect had already been taking place in Montréal, from this point on, they begin to occur more frequently and with more ambitious objectives.

**April 20** The Salon Plan Nord, a job fair, takes place at the Palais des congrès. Jean Charest is there to deliver a speech about his government's plan for the accelerated development of Québec's portion of the Labrador Peninsula—land which is still inhabited, for the most part, by indigenous people determined to live as sovereign, autonomous nations. The single largest street battle of the strike unfolds, paralyzing a large section of downtown for hours and capturing international headlines. For the first time in the strike, cops flee demonstrators. Its significance is immediately apparent to anarchists. Yet no one can predict how intense things will get.

**May 4** A truce between the students and the government has come and gone. Angry night demonstrations have taken the streets, then been pacified; morning blockades of highways, skyscrapers, and other targets have ceased altogether. People have barely caught their breath from the largest anti-capitalist May Day demonstration in recent memory. And now buses from across the province are unloading militants of all sorts in the small town of





*Student assembly discussing the continuation of the strike.*

Victoriaville; the goal is to disrupt the Liberal Party convention that was scheduled to take place at a Montréal hotel, then hastily transplanted to the countryside. The clash between demonstrators and the Sûreté du Québec police force is brutal; people on both sides are badly injured, but the red squares get the worst of it. Another person loses an eye; still another is put into a coma. Things don't feel as good as they did two weeks prior.

**May 10** The streets of Montréal have been peaceful for a few days, but this morning, smoke bombs go off in four métro stations across the city; the whole system is shut down for hours. Thanks to a good citizen with a cellphone, the Service de police de la Ville de Montréal (SPVM) releases pictures of some suspects on its website the same day, and four people surrender at a police station soon thereafter.

**May 18** Two new laws come into effect at midnight, both of which restrict the ability of participants in the strike movement to act. The night demonstrations turn confrontational again around this time, but despite heroic efforts against the police, the movement is unable to assert itself in the streets as effectively as it did a month earlier. That said, more people are participating than ever before. Spontaneous demonstrations begin in neighborhoods across Montréal, helping new neighborhood assemblies to take off.

**June 7** The Canadian Grand Prix begins with a rich bastards' gala. Militants fail to disrupt it, but over the next few days, despite a seriously compromised rapport de force with the police, they succeed in disrupting Montréal's most important tourist event of the summer. Many inspiring things happen; yet it is clear that the movement is on the decline.

**August 1** Confirming what people have suspected for weeks, the premier calls a general election for September 4. The Parti Québécois asks the movement to agree to an "electoral truce."

**August 13** Classes at some cégeps are scheduled to begin. School authorities, however, shut down classes so that anti-strike students can attend general assemblies on the matter of continuing the strike. Of the four cégeps voting on this matter, three vote to end the strike; they join schools that had voted similarly in the days prior. Except for a few departments at UQÀM, the strike collapses almost entirely over the next few weeks—though demonstrations continue, sometimes turning confrontational.

**September 4** When the votes are counted, the PQ has won a majority in the National Assembly. The tuition hike is canceled by decree a few days later. Some call it victory.





*Police car upended during the March 15 demonstration against police brutality.*

attached to a romanticized notion of anti-capitalist struggle in Montréal at the turn of the millennium. And yet older insurrectionists are also guilty of using the same tactics that they've been using for years, often with no better sense of the political context than the younger people they are lecturing.

Rather than deferring to age and experience, we can sharpen our analytical skills through discussion groups, general assemblies oriented towards communication as an end in itself, and more writing, theorizing, and critique. These are the processes that enable a crew, a community, or a distributed network of subversives to gain mutual understanding and refine their analyses in order to speak precisely about what is happening, what must be done, and—most importantly—how to do it. It is essential to find the time and space to do this with people you trust, whose analysis you also trust, and ideally who come from a range of backgrounds and experience.

This isn't a recipe for success. The future can't be foreseen with total accuracy. But things sometimes play out in similar ways over and over again. There are patterns we can identify. We have a better chance of finding them if many of us are looking, and even better if we disagree on some things and draw on different knowledge.

If anarchists don't improve our ability to foresee events, we will keep repeating two grievous mistakes. First, we won't know when it's time for us to throw ourselves into a struggle with everything we've got—when the risks are worth the possible consequences. Alas, many anarchists in Montréal waited until far later than would have been ideal to get involved in the student strike. Second, we won't recognize when we should withdraw because the movement is headed toward a catastrophe that will hurt us—as the events of August 2012 did, at the end of the strike.

Once the 2011 school year started, some anglophone anarchists from outside the university, or who were students but mostly organized outside of student spaces, made a concerted effort to insert themselves and anarchist ideas in general into student organizing at McGill and Concordia. This was sometimes as sloppy and disorganized as the individual anarchists involved. But that didn't matter; what mattered was consistency. Local anarchists' distribution of certain texts at McGill, such as *After the Fall* and "Communiqué from an Absent Future," probably contributed significantly to the occupations that occurred on McGill campus during the 2011-12 school year, both before the strike even started.





IF YOU DON'T DROP THE  
BALL, YOU'LL EVENTUALLY  
GET A CHANCE TO SHOOT.

*The first Molotov cocktail of the strike, the night of March 15.*

Many of the texts distributed were written in inaccessible insurrectionist jargon; anarchists often came off as total wingnuts. But the point was not to appeal to the masses. It was to make connections with specific people who would be participating in the strike when it began—a process that was developed further by inviting people to events at La Belle Époque, the newly-opened anarchist social center in the Southwest, or just by hanging out. This, in turn, encouraged those people to expand the discourse of the strike to other areas: struggle in defense of the Earth, against the police, against racism and colonialism, and so on.

Student militants at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM) and Cégep du Vieux Montréal had been organizing for much longer. These two schools, from which other strikes had historically emerged, were also the source of most of the momentum for the 2012 strike. Although both schools already had a strong radical presence, political graffiti within certain buildings was ramped up in the years before the strike. Occupations and demonstrations were organized. In early 2011, Hydro-Québec's downtown headquarters was smoke-bombed by students from Vieux, forcing an evacuation. There was also a lot of work behind the scenes—distributing

propaganda, organizing informative assemblies, and the like. Syndicalist anarchists participated actively in their student associations and in the Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante (ASSÉ); this meant office work, balancing finances, writing articles for ASSÉ's newspaper *Ultimatum* or for individual associations' broadsheets, and a lot of organizing limited by the discourse of the official student movement. Some anarchists have been critical of this approach, but there's no question that anarchists on the whole benefited from the fact that some people were doing this.

Syndicalist methods created the strike; it could be argued that they also created the limitations that would ultimately produce the movement's downfall. A point that is sometimes missed, however, is that every social upheaval will have built-in limitations, and there isn't even a chance to overcome those limitations until the upheaval exists as a material reality. Despite the tensions that existed between various anti-capitalist and pro-strike factions at Cégep du Vieux and UQÀM, it is clear that the lowest-common-denominator mobilization approach of creating opposition to the tuition hike complemented direct action, if only by fostering a political environment in which other students could understand why "the





*Fighting outside the Palais des congrès during the riots of April 20.*

*The parking lot near the Palais des congrès on April 20.*





issues" were serious enough that some people would take such action.

Crises create opportunities. This is perhaps the most important maxim for anyone who wants to defend land, freedom, and dignity against the ravages of capitalism. In this context, it is problematic that many anarchists, in the years before the strike, were willfully ignorant of the political machinations that produced the flashpoint of the strike. It took a long time for anarchists who had been following the developments to convince their comrades of the importance of the impending events.

Of course, given the right circumstances and skill sets, *we can generate crises ourselves*. This is exactly what some anarchists, upon finding themselves as students at institutions with a tradition of direct democracy and a history of strike-making, proceeded to do in the years leading up to 2012—just as other anarchists had done in the years leading up to 2005 and earlier strikes.

Anglophone anarchists in Montréal—many of whom grew up in other provinces or in the US, whose French is marginal at best, often possessed of rather few francophone friends, frequently either university dropouts or enrolled at schools with less interesting political cultures—were usually not as disposed to help produce a crisis. This was also true of older anarchists, those with jobs, or those on welfare and genuinely poor; in essence, non-student anarchists of all language backgrounds. But, though anarchists from certain social positions may not have been able to contribute as much to *making the strike happen*, there was plenty for those people to do to improve their capacity to participate in the strike once it began.

The most important thing is consistency—doing what you can from where you are. It doesn't matter how limited your abilities or social position are. If you don't drop the ball, you'll eventually get a chance to shoot.

## SEIZING THE PEAK OF OPPORTUNITY

Though some prepared for the strike itself, few did anything to prepare for the situation that arose from it: the *peak of opportunity*.

There were two such periods, actually. One started on April 20, 2012, with the protests against the Plan Nord conference, during which it became clear that the police were temporarily outmatched, and lasted until May 4, when it degenerated into more brutal and less inspiring violence at the Liberal Party convention in Victoriaville. This was a period

when *so much* could have been done, and yet many insurrecto-hooligans contented themselves with mere rioting—as exciting as that may have been. Soon enough, it was no longer fun. It wasn't just random unfortunates with presumably little street experience who were getting arrested and injured, but ourselves and our friends as well. This is all the worse because almost *anything* could have happened in Montréal at that time if people had been able to step back from the whirlwind of events, gather their comrades, identify an objective, and act.

In point of fact, it seems this did happen, but perhaps too late. On May 10, the most effective sabotage of the Montréal métro to date took place, with smoke bombs going off at four different stations across the city. If such an act had occurred during a large demonstration or riot in downtown Montréal, it could have created an even more uncontrollable situation across the island—perhaps opening new windows of opportunity for anarchists and others to seize territory or go on the offensive. By May 10, however, an uneasy peace had taken hold in Québec with the pacification of the night demonstrations and the passing of the last spectacular clashes during daylight hours, May Day and the Battle of Victo. In this context, the smoke bombing incident appeared as a daring attempt to *reignite* conflict, not as a conscious effort to expand its scope at the height of things.

The period that started on April 20 was not a revolutionary moment, but perhaps only because no one proposed, via words or action, to take the logical step from mass vandalism to the collective expropriation of goods and seizure of buildings—the kind of activity that would have quickly brought out even larger crowds than were already participating in the strike. Things might have gotten a little nasty after that, no doubt, especially given the lengths to which the state is willing to go to uphold the institution of private property. But had things escalated to this point, the revolutionary potential of the situation would have become apparent to everyone.

There was a second peak of opportunity a few weeks later, and it too was squandered.

To be clear, the opportunities that this second peak presented were not produced by militants' capacity to maintain a rapport de force with the police. On the nights immediately before and after the government passed its Special Law to crack down on the strike, there were major street battles that lasted long into the night, probably involving the largest numbers of any post-sundown street action and certainly producing the largest mass arrests. But while many experienced these clashes



This was our chance to reach out to all the people whose political analyses, experiences, or backgrounds were different from ours. Most of them knew what they were there to do. If anarchists had articulated to others a method of *how to do it* while also encouraging people *to go farther*, it's possible that the movement could have reached still higher peaks.

as inspiring, including many out-of-town anarchists who had shown up for the anarchist book fair, the battles proved ephemeral. They were the final and most spectacular clashes of a movement that was rapidly losing the capacity to go toe-to-toe with the police that it had gained in the early months of the strike, and particularly between March 22 and May 4.

New opportunities were produced, though, by the expansion of anti-government sentiment to parts of society that hadn't previously been involved in the strike. Suddenly, there were small roving demonstrations in neighborhoods across the city and in cities across the province. A sizeable number of these people were said to have supported the tuition hike, but fundamentally objected to the government's "anti-democratic" means of defending the capitalist economy and its monopoly on violence. The numbers also grew downtown; the demonstration on May 22 may have had as many as 400,000 people.

This opened up a moment akin to the Occupy moment in other places.\* What happened is that people with radically different ideas were meeting in the streets, vaguely united by their opposition to how things were going in their society. Perhaps they were excited by the energy of the moment; perhaps they were open to challenging preconceived notions about how things should be, and how to get there.

This didn't happen on the scale that it could have. Many anarchists cited the shortcomings of the caserole demos and the neighborhood assemblies to justify not engaging with them. Of course, there were shortcomings; that's to be expected whenever people more familiar with obedience to authority suddenly opt for defiance. Their strategies, rhetoric, analysis, and even attitudes weren't always ideal from

\* There were Québécois manifestations of Occupy, including Occupy Montréal, but they didn't arouse nearly as much interest as the movement did south of the border and elsewhere in Canada. Even more importantly, they never put much effort into making themselves relevant by developing a street presence—even a pacifist one.

an ideologically purist anarchist perspective. But this was as true of those who fought in the streets—including those young and patriotic Québécois men who saw their combat with the police as a continuation of the FLQ's hypermasculine methodology—as it was of those who opted to bang pots and pans or to participate in the "popular neighborhood assemblies" that had, in many cases, devolved after a few weeks into hangout spaces for all the local weirdos interested in radical politics.

The important thing here is that the confrontations of the book fair weekend marked the point when street fighting downtown started to deliver diminishing returns, in terms of its ability to disrupt the capitalist economy and improve the movement's rapport de force with the government. At that point, it was probably more feasible to *broaden* the disturbances than to escalate the ones already taking place.

Both peaks of opportunity, starting on April 20 and May 18 respectively, involved peak numbers of people engaging in particular activities—either the specific activity of fighting the police during the first peak, or the general activity of participating in the strike movement during the second. These were our chance to reach out to all the people whose political analyses, experiences, or backgrounds were different from ours. Most of them knew what they were there to do. If anarchists had articulated to others a method of *how to do it* while also encouraging people *to go farther*, it's possible that the movement could have reached still higher peaks.

## CUTTING OUR LOSSES

The strike didn't die over the course of the summer. It stagnated.

After the Grand Prix, the demonstrations and meetings continued—quite a lot, in fact, albeit less than during the spring. June 22 and July 22 saw tens of thousands of people come out; not a single



night demonstration failed to take the streets. There was a bit of a ruckus in Burlington, Vermont, when premiers and governors in the northeastern part of the continent met there at the end of July. Plans were drawn up for a convergence for the *rentrée* (the return to classes and the recommencement of the suspended semester) in August, starting first at cégeps and then moving on to universities.

All of this happened, yet none of it materially improved the strike's prospects for defending itself, particularly in the face of an election campaign—one of the most effective tactics democratic states have at their disposal to shut down social movements. It had been suspected for weeks, then essentially confirmed in the days immediately prior, but Jean Charest, the premier, made the official announcement on August 1.

The Parti Québécois offered a deal to the movement: settle down a bit, we'll win this election, and then we'll suspend the hike. It was argued, not unreasonably, that disruptive activity could hurt the PQ's chances of beating the incumbent Liberals. Consequently, pacifist vigilantes stepped up their efforts to interfere with confrontational tactics at the night demonstrations, and the cégeps unanimously voted against the continuation of the strike. The strike did continue in some departments at UQÀM, but the effect was marginal, and efforts to enforce a shutdown of classes were undermined by scabs, security, and police.

Anarchists had taken many risks and suffered severe consequences in their efforts to strengthen and embolden the movement as a whole. Many had already been beaten and arrested, and faced charges and uncertain futures. More than any other political tendency involved in the strike, anarchists were the ones who escalated the situation to the point that Jean Charest was forced to call an early election to end the crisis. Yet despite our best efforts, we had become foot soldiers for a movement that had always had a nationalist, social-democratic, and reformist character. Now this movement no longer needed us to win its unimaginative and ultimately shortsighted baseline objective: the cancellation of this specific tuition hike. It became difficult to avoid the conclusion that we had been *used*. Many of us felt, perhaps irrationally, that our efforts over the past few months had been utterly in vain. We told ourselves that we had gained experience, friends, and so on, that we had been part of something "historic," but this sort of positive rhetoric failed to improve morale. In some cases, it just made things worse.

Since the strike's end, many anarchists have argued that we failed to apply the right tactics to the

situation. What could we have done differently? What would have produced a greater success for us in August?

But this line of critique may miss the mark. Perhaps we should step back and ask whether it was strategic for anarchists to try to revive the strike after militancy had withered over the summer. At the time, everyone embraced the "common sense" assumption that the top priority was to keep the strike alive. Hindsight is 20/20, but the negative consequences of that approach should have been predictable.

Maybe, instead, we should have just gotten out of there.

Now, I am not proposing that we should have withdrawn *all* support from the strike, but that we should have withdrawn *some* forms of support, espe-



cially the ones that involved considerable personal risk. Anarchists had previously proven capable of this. Many anarchists withdrew at the right time during the occupation of Cégep du Vieux Montréal and the night riot of March 15. In doing so, they left less experienced participants to face their fate alone—resulting in mass arrests in both cases. This was a little callous, no doubt; but during both events, anarchists made a point of offering advice to people who were making some pretty questionable decisions about how to conduct themselves. Anarchists eventually—and in my opinion, correctly—decided to take care of themselves once it was clear that things were about to get ugly and that their suggestions were falling on deaf ears. And in the aftermath, anarchists organized support for those arrested.

Regarding the strike as a whole, getting out wouldn't mean, for example, anarchists suddenly abandoning their critical support of the idea of free education. A common denominator position among





*Militants fighting back briefly against an overwhelming police presence on May Day.*

anarchists in Québec, from syndicalists to anti-civil nihilist types, is that Québec's privileged proletariat deserves the nice things in life—like a useless liberal arts education—at least as much as Québec's even more privileged ruling class. To say it differently: "If capitalism, then at least welfare capitalism."

Making a strategic exit wouldn't have stopped anarchists from intervening where it made sense to do so, either—but it *would* have meant that anarchists ceased helping the student movement whenever it stumbled, talking confidence into it whenever it hesitated, and trying to knock some sense into it whenever it was about to go in a stupid direction. In many ways, anarchists related to the student movement the way you might relate to a partner—in this case, an overly dependent partner who was not very appreciative of the help we often offered him unconditionally, sometimes was downright emotionally abusive, and really, do we even *like* this guy that much?

But anarchists often lack self-confidence. Sometimes we don't know when it's time to cut our losses and move on. We were under the impression that

we needed the strike to go on in order to continue building up our own power. Yes, we had *invested* a lot in the movement, and it would have felt wrong just to pull out and let it do its own thing—which, no doubt, would have left us shaking our heads in exasperation. But was it really a good idea to invest *even more* in it when things were evidently headed in an ugly direction?

Our efforts to revive the movement did a lot to hurt the momentum that anarchists in Montréal had been building, in stops and starts, for years—since long before the strike. This set us up for disappointment and depression, needlessly demoralizing and demobilizing us. The problem was that we were pursuing a grossly unrealistic objective. The option of continuing the strike, *especially* given the general decline in confrontational activity during the early part of the summer, simply could not compete with the option of electoral compromise with the PQ. Democratic ideas have significantly greater sway in the student movement and among the general population than anarchist ideas. As unfortunate as this is, we should recognize this and act accordingly.





*Protesters gather in the small town of Victoriaville on May 4 to oppose the conference of the Liberal Party.*

## MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

The worst thing about the decision to prioritize continuing the strike was that, at that point, there were plenty more interesting and worthwhile paths open. For example, we could have focused on resisting and counteracting state repression. Repression had affected anarchists the most severely, but it also affected revolutionaries from other tendencies—most significantly Maoists—as well as many people who had simply been caught up in the energy of the strike and received criminal charges as a result.

During the spring, anarchists organized some powerful noise demonstrations, and there were also actions at Montréal's courthouse, the Palais de justice. After the strike was over, in fall 2012, a large and spirited demonstration took to the streets in solidarity with everyone facing charges, living with restrictive conditions, or otherwise suffering as a result of things they had been accused of doing during the strike. Various texts appeared on this topic, as well. Yet at the end of the summer, during the period of the election and the *rentrée*, there was no organizing to speak of on that front.

The only thing anarchists did collectively in August, besides attempting to stop the *rentrée*, was to campaign against representative democracy itself. This could have been a promising terrain of struggle,

but almost everyone involved was also wrapped up in the losing battle of continuing the strike. Things didn't turn out well on either front—but even more importantly, both undertakings were posited by the anarchists involved as being in solidarity with the student movement, when it was precisely the student movement that was facilitating the isolation and repression of anarchists by abandoning the strike.

In other words, the student movement was acting contrary to the principle of solidarity. And by buying into the PQ's proposal for an “electoral” truce, the student movement sabotaged its own most basic objective, with the PQ ultimately implementing indexation rather than a true tuition freeze.

As a side point, it's both facile and inaccurate to blame movement leaders and politicians for this turn of events. The strike was voted down in directly democratic assemblies. No matter how loud and influential certain individuals were, it was the students *as a whole* who chose to abandon the strike.

The hopeless attempt to save the student movement from itself took away from the effectiveness of anarchists' anti-democratic campaign. It was basically the same people doing everything, and they didn't have the energy to do everything; their energies were split between appealing to students to keep the strike going, and appealing to society at large not to vote.



Anarchists saw these as identical, which was a poor understanding of the social reality. For one thing, there was the statist, reformist, pro-voting stance of the majority of the student movement's participants—but do we really need to beat that particular dead horse any longer?



*Barricades and projectiles versus tear gas and rubber bullets: the Battle of Victo, May 4.*

Meanwhile, a lot of people living in Montréal have a difficult time simply surviving because of the neighborhood they live in, the color of their skin, their lack of citizenship or status, or their accent in French—if they can speak it at all. There's no doubt that plenty of marginalized folks were down with at least certain aspects of the student movement. But neither is there any doubt that most of them had only limited interest in the self-centered struggle of a bunch of privileged brats who, broadly speaking, did not reciprocate by concerning themselves with the more dire struggles of migrants, indigenous people, and others.\*

Now, I'm not saying you need to take off your red square if you want to start talking to such people about the moral bankruptcy of democracy. But maybe the fact that the PQ is going to sell out the movement shouldn't be the center of your analysis if you want to address people who aren't particularly invested in the movement. All the adamant social

\* There were many people—including anarchists, but also others, particularly anarchism-skeptical feminists—who pushed to change the discourse of the student movement from within its formal structures, such as cégep associations, CLASSE congresses and committees, and formal and informal departmental associations at universities. The aim was often to see the struggles of women, queer people, and people of color mentioned in demonstration callouts and public statements. As a result of their efforts, the analysis presented in the manifesto that CLASSE released during the summer, *Share Our Future*, was less terrible than it might have been. Yet improved rhetoric never translated into meaningful action on the part of CLASSE in solidarity with indigenous people, Montréal's racialized youth, or any other marginalized category of people besides pro-strike students in Québec.

democrats to whom anarchists' analysis of the situation might have been useful—given that they were legitimately seeking a freeze, not indexation—were completely unwilling to listen to anarchists during election time. That was their mistake. But our mistake was to keep trying to get through to the social democrats rather than reaching out to others who might have been a little more open had we been less alienating.

It's hard to imagine that the results could have been worse than what actually happened if, instead of trying to engage students and other participants or supporters of the movement with anti-electoral ideas, anarchists had used the same time and energy to advance a critique of Québécois democracy by other means. Sure, I'm skeptical that dropping a banner emblazoned with the words *NEVER VOTE! NEVER SURRENDER! À BAS LA SOCIÉTÉ-PRISON «DÉMOCRATIQUE!»* from a train bridge in a neighborhood full of francophone pensioners, then failing to publicize that this even happened, is the best use of anyone's time. But as confusing, poorly contextualized, and silly as that might be, at least it speaks for itself without centralizing the students' struggle to preserve their privileged position in society.

It's interesting to think about what other projects anarchists could have undertaken, unencumbered by the student movement. What if anarchists, in neighborhood assemblies or more informally, had pushed a struggle against gentrification and manifestations of capitalism in the areas where we actually live, while police resources were tied up watching night demonstrations and maintaining order downtown? In other words—what if we had taken advantage of the political situation to improve *our own* long-term material position, rather than improving the rapport de force between the government and the students?

We also could have done more to usurp the megaphone, both literally and figuratively. This happened earlier in the strike: on the night of March 7, after a demonstrator lost his eye to an SPVM grenade, anarchists shouted down a few self-appointed leaders' appeals for people to express their outrage peacefully, successfully convincing the majority of the crowd to stop standing around in Berri Square and either physically confront the police or at least defy their commands to disperse. There were attacks on two different police stations that night, the first such actions of the strike.

In August, as on March 7, there were crowds of outraged people, but this time, they weren't outraged about police violence. Instead, as an outvoted minority, they were upset by their fellow students' decision to abandon the strike. The situation was



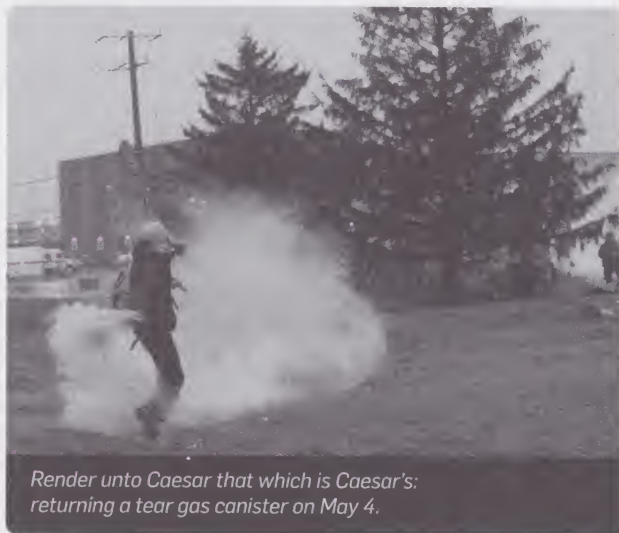
a bit different: to go the fighting route would have meant ignoring the final verdict of a *directly democratic vote*, not just a few people with megaphones. In retrospect, it's not clear how many people would ever have been willing to do that, given that the authority of such a vote is almost universally accepted in the galaxy of Québécois student politics. But alas, it seems that, in the aftermath of those disastrous student assemblies, there was no one even able to *bring up the idea* to the hardly insignificant number of militants (student and otherwise) suddenly bereft of the w previous months' democratic justification for continuing the fight.

Pursuing a hard line against nationalists and their discourse would also have divided and weakened the movement, but it would have publicized anarchists' position on the Parti Québécois in clear terms. It would have offered an opportunity to call out their racist Muslim baiting in pursuit of the xenophobe vote, and their noxious valorization of French colonization on this continent. Had harsh critiques of CLASSE and/or ASSÉ come out when the strike was still in motion, rather than months later, this would also have divided the movement, albeit instructively. But if the movement is going to lose anyway, *why not divide it?*

It was clear after a certain point in August, if not earlier, that things were rapidly coming to a close. This was an inevitable result of the efforts of nationalists, social democrats, and others who had always been pursuing a conflicting agenda. Revolutionary struggle can be an ugly business, and there are times when it makes sense for us to hold our noses and work with people whose politics we consider objectionable. We should never attack or alienate those we dislike for no good reason. But, at the end

of the strike, the benefits of making an open break were clear.

This is particularly important in light of the student movement's unforgivable failure to support those who were facing judicially imposed conditions including exile from the Island of Montréal, non-



*Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's: returning a tear gas canister on May 4.*

association with friends or lovers, and the possibility of serious jail time in the future. It doesn't matter whether the accused did what the state charged them with; the point is that illegal activity was essential to whatever success the strike had, and letting anyone suffer because the state pinned some of that activity on them sets a bad precedent for strikes to come. That's the strategic argument, anyway—the ethical one should be obvious.

In short, anarchists could have done many things other than what we *did* do, which was to stay at the core of the movement. It was already clear by the

This is adventurism: the sin of actually enjoying the struggles we participate in. We may not all like the same things, or be capable of the same types of action, but our common thread—regardless of divergent physical ability, tactical preferences, skill sets, resources, and social privileges—is that we are fighters. The restoration of the illusion of social peace deprives us of something we *need*. It's harder to position ourselves offensively when the conflict is no longer visible in the streets.



weekend of the Grand Prix that the movement was on its way out; the events of June and July (or the lack thereof) confirmed this. Yet anarchists continued participating in general assemblies and committee meetings; to be precise, anarchists either returned to those spaces after having left them, or came to them for the very first time during the whole strike. This was done out of a mistaken belief that it was *necessary to do so*, that the struggle *depended* on the revival of the strike.

## DEPRESSION AND DEMOBILIZATION

The end of the strike was marked by a pronounced failure to address the widespread phenomenon of post-strike depression. We might better identify this as *post-uprising depression*, common anywhere that has experienced sustained periods of social rupture.

Many windows opened during the strike, but now we find ourselves “between strikes,” as some people say here, which is to say in a period of demobilization. Compared to the spring of 2012, it feels unusually difficult to pull off even the simplest things.

Depression is an understandable but unfortunate response to the end of the strike. It’s useless, and a little cruel, to tell people that they shouldn’t feel sad about something that is an *objectively depressing* turn of events from an anarchist adventurer’s standpoint. Like any period of social rupture, the strike offered an exciting and dangerous context, presenting challenges to anyone caught up in it. To be sure, not everyone wants excitement, danger, or inconvenience. Many people would prefer to drive down rue Sainte-Catherine without worrying about giant demonstrations, or go to school without running into hard pickets, or take the métro without fear of a smoke bomb attack or bags of bricks on the rails. In contrast, the kind of person who’s going to become—and remain—an active, attack-oriented anarchist probably thrives on that sort of thing.

This is adventurism: the sin of actually enjoying the struggles we participate in. We may not all like the same things, or be capable of the same types of action, but our common thread—regardless of divergent physical ability, tactical preferences, skill sets, resources, and social privileges—is that we are fighters. The restoration of social peace deprives us of something we *need*. This peace is an illusion, and the social war continues, but it’s harder to position ourselves offensively when it’s no longer playing out in the streets every day and night—when thousands of people no longer see themselves as participants,

having returned to the old routines of work or school or skid life.

There are lots of different ways to cope with depression. Hedonism is one way; after the strike ended, there was a heavy turn in some circles towards alcohol consumption, drug use, and hardcore partying. Another way is to switch gears entirely: some left town or put all of their energy into single-issue organizing, while others threw themselves back into school or art or earning money. Some of these means of coping were healthier than others. But as a whole, they all contributed to isolating people from one another and atomizing the struggle.

It was worse for the sizeable number of anarchists who stuck it out longer, trying to do exactly what they had been doing a few months earlier: going to demonstrations, mobilizing people for them, trying to hype people up and “make things happen.” After the electoral victory of the PQ, this simply didn’t work anymore. The problem wasn’t just that many anarchists had quit the strike by that time (although that certainly did have an impact). The problem was that anarchists in Montréal didn’t quit *collectively*. Instead, we quit one at a time, and often only once we had reached a maximum of exhaustion, a low of misery, or both.

Of course, it’s a stretch to speak of anarchists in Montréal doing anything in a coordinated way. There are simply too many organizations, nodes, social scenes, and affinity groups—each of which has its own distinct goals, outlook, and capacity. But none of these groups withdrew explicitly from the strike. Formal anarchist organizations in the city, except for a few propaganda outfits into heavy theory, had never fully engaged themselves in the strike *as organizations*.<sup>\*</sup> It was individuals, usually working with others on the basis of friendship, who made the decision whether to drop out. The informal associations of people who worked closely together during the strike never met to discuss what people could do *together* as the strike was winding down. Consequently, these associations mostly evaporated with the strike.

There were many intentional discussions in June and July, announced ahead of time through social media and listservs, but most of these were focused on “the tasks at hand”—blocking the upcoming *rentrée* and continuing the strike. In my own circles, there was never time or space to talk about how people felt about the situation as a whole, how they

<sup>\*</sup> One exception is CLAC, which did make the conscious decision to organize demonstrations during the strike, and thereby did more than simply produce propaganda. CLAC’s politics aren’t explicitly anarchist, but anarchist ideas and principles are hegemonic within the organization.



felt about their own personal situations, or what they hoped to get out of continuing to engage with the strike. Nor were there many discussions between people who felt political affinity with one another, or who cared about maintaining positive relationships with one another more than they cared about abstract political objectives.

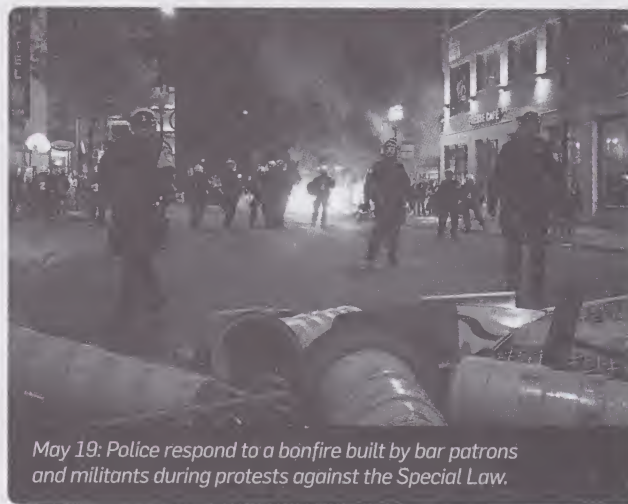
During the spring, we shared some incredible moments together. We flipped over police cars, partied in the streets, forced cops to run for their lives, painted the halls of university buildings according to our tastes, made out with strangers during street parties that became riots, and generally lived life to the fullest. It wasn't all good, but the parts that were good were *really good*. Over the summer, like many other people, I made the mistake of attributing all that to the strike, rather than to the specific people who were in the streets acting to create those moments. The strike created the context in which those people were able to act together: it brought large numbers into the streets, it facilitated us running into each other over and over again, it frustrated and overwhelmed the forces that defend the capitalist economy.

But the strike had no agency of its own. It was itself the product of human agency—and by no means only the agency of anarchists. Although we were an influential minority in some regards, such as determining how confrontational the demonstrations were, we were not actually that important. Another influential minority consisted of careerist student politicians who were able to influence other aspects of the strike, like which images and narratives of the strike were broadcast on television and blogspace, much more effectively than we could.

Anarchists needn't have been depressed by the end of the strike. This isn't a macho admonishment that people shouldn't let their feelings get the best of them; I don't think the answer is for us to become coldly rational revolutionaries who move in a Terminator-like linear fashion towards our objectives. We are emotional creatures, and that is for the best. My criticism is that we staked our morale, our passion to fight, on the wrong thing: not on the health of the relationships of people seeking to be dangerous together, but on the health of the strike as a force that could interrupt capitalist law and order—which many of the people who created the strike never saw as a goal in itself, but only as a temporary means to a reformist goal.

As the strike was winding down, I should have dedicated more time to making connections with all those potential friends. There was one demonstration in August that I knew would be boring, but I went anyway. I saw someone there I'd seen

a dozen times since February. He recognized me, too, and made a reference to the sort of thing we *should* have been doing. I laughed, but I didn't keep talking—even though that was the last chance I'd see him. I should have introduced myself, tried to



May 19: Police respond to a bonfire built by bar patrons and militants during protests against the Special Law.

exchange contact information, and passed on an invitation to get together at La Belle Époque. It was my last chance to do that.

As for the people with whom I was closest during the strike—partners in the street, fellow writers of timely propaganda, and other co-conspirators—these were the people with whom I should have been discussing what would come *after the strike*. What did our experiences together during those months mean? As the larger movement fell apart, could that history of working together transform into something else?

But relationships between specific people were not prioritized at the end of the strike. Instead, we prioritized relationships to *masses*—which, it turns out, are much more easily seduced by politicians than by people like us.

## LEGACY

It took a few months after the election for things to pick up again—but they did. Struggle in Montréal can cycle quickly from highs to lows and back again. February of 2013 saw demonstrations first against the Salon des Ressources Naturelles, a reprise of the previous year's Salon Plan Nord, then a major mobilization to oppose the PQ's Summit on Higher Education, at which the new governing party confirmed that, rather than freezing tuition, they would index it to inflation and the cost of living. This was not a broken promise on their part; it had been part of their election platform.





*Confrontational tactics spread widely in the course of the strike.*

The next month started off promisingly, with the night demonstration on Tuesday, March 5, getting a little rowdy near the Palais des congrès. Yet that was the end of this second cycle. On March 12, another night demonstration—albeit much smaller—was crushed before it even left Berri Square. On March 15, the SPVM, with the assistance of the SQ, crushed Montréal's annual anti-police demonstration decisively. From that point on, all but one of the unpermitted demonstrations\* that marched through downtown during the spring of 2013 were kettled and dispersed before they could become disruptive.

On the municipal, the provincial, and the federal level, the state has taken measures to prevent any reprise of spring 2012, passing laws to restrict or criminalize the essential elements of militant protest. The most ominous of these measures is Bill C-309, which finally became law on June 19, 2013.

\* The "Status for All" demonstration on May 18, 2013, which was chiefly organized by the migrant justice organization Solidarity Across Borders, is the single exception.

Applicable across the entire territory of the Canadian federation, it gives courts the ability to issue a prison sentence of up to ten years if a person is convicted of wearing a mask in the course of criminal activity during a demonstration. The simple fact of being present in an illegal demonstration can be considered criminal in itself.

Of course, actual police tactics are ultimately more important than codes and ordinances. The SPVM have evidently taken time to analyze the events of last spring, identifying their errors, drawing lessons, updating their old techniques, learning new ones, upgrading their equipment, and training officers. The results are plain to see.

In Québécois student politics, the reformist federations FÉUQ and FÉCQ have seen their influence reduced significantly, whereas the more radical ASSÉ (the kernel around which the now defunct CLASSE was formed) has more student associations affiliated with it than ever before. This is good for us, if only because ASSÉ's direct democracy creates spaces in



which it is harder to shut people up—and anarchists are precisely the kind of people that social-democratic politicians usually want to silence.

At the same time, ASSÉ is now disorganized and largely dysfunctional. The members who possessed revolutionary aspirations and the strategic ideas to match have largely abandoned the organization. There is good reason to think that, just as after the 2005 strike, it will take years before the organization is once again capable of mounting an effective challenge to the government. Whether or not anarchists choose to participate in that struggle (and some surely will, even if others don't), it shouldn't be taken for granted that the next social major upheaval in Québec will arise from the student movement.

Indeed, in the wake of 2012's uprising, we should reconsider the strategies that have worked for us in the past. This is certainly true for all those who, in one way or another, sought to defend "the Québec model" over the course of the strike: the most significant student strike in Québec's history, by just about any measure, didn't even realize its most basic demand. For anarchists fighting in this province—and anyone else who would willfully jeopardize the comforts of welfare capitalism for half a chance at revolution and real freedom—it is incumbent upon us to determine how we should proceed towards our objectives, or live our politics, or both, in what is now a very uncertain political environment.

I will conclude with just a few concrete suggestions. First off, however we pursue our struggles in the future, we should strive to build more infrastructure, more formal communications networks, and more informal social networks that are autonomous of movements comprised largely of people with

whom we have serious political differences. Doing this could make it possible that, the next time a large portion of society is drawn into the streets, we will be able to participate in the conflict without losing sight of our own values, building momentum that is not dependent on someone else's movement.

Once we have infrastructure and networks of our own, as many anarchists in Montréal already do, we should be sure to *use them*. The thing that distinguishes revolutionary infrastructure from sub-cultural infrastructure—that is, an anarchist social center from a DIY punk space—is that, *alongside* its role as another space to live, socialize, and make ends meet, it should *also* serve to encourage people to throw themselves into anarchist struggle, and to spread the skills necessary for that task.

The latter first.

There are many practical skills that some anarchists already have, and others need to learn: digital self-defense, trauma support, tactics for street action, proficiency in different languages, and so on. These are all useful for specific situations—but we also need to be prepared for *general* situations. We need to be able to recognize when momentum is picking up, when we are at a peak of opportunity, when things are slowly or rapidly coming to a halt, and *what is strategic for anarchists to do* in each of these situations. Studying history, not just because it is curious or inspiring but in order to identify patterns and apply lessons, is essential if we hope to orient ourselves in the trajectory of the next upheaval to come.

Finally, the next time we realize that total anarchist triumph is no longer in the cards, we should consider the advantages of going out with a bang.

## Further Reading

For best results, read this in combination with our exhaustive chronological report, *While the Iron Is Hot: Student Strike & Social Revolt in Québec, Spring 2012*.

For another case study on this subject, read *After the Crest, part III: Barcelona Anarchists at Low Tide*, which analyzes the rhythms of struggle in Barcelona over the past several years, discussing the complex relationship between anarchists and

larger social movements as popular struggles escalated and then subsided.


In addition, our "December Revisited" interview with Greek anarchists following the December 2008 uprising offers valuable insight on the limits that insurrection reached and how it positioned anarchists for the next round of struggle.

All three are freely available via [crimethinc.com](http://crimethinc.com):



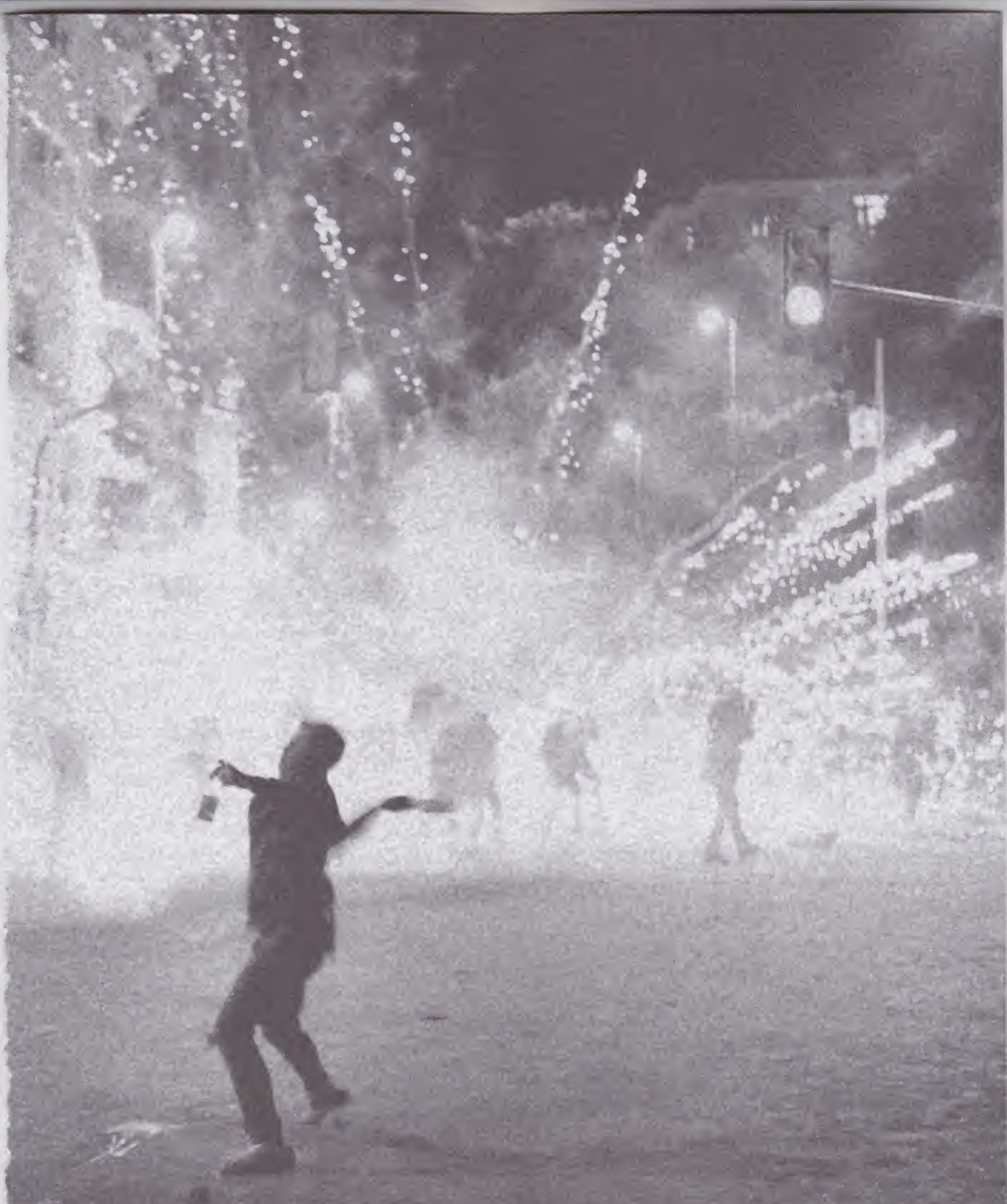
<http://cwc.im/hotiron>  
<http://cwc.im/8>  
<http://cwc.im/atcpt3>





# Addictive to Tears





# **The Gezi Resistance, June 2013**





I look around and can't fathom what has become of this place, of the streets where I grew up. Where I went on my first date and went to my first protest, where I had my first drink sitting on the curb, where my friends and I periodically got into trouble. It was all on these streets of Beyoğlu. Now, we are thousands and thousands taunting the police in unison, chanting for them to gas us so we can get going. And finally it arrives: the canisters are flying in one after another. We are so used to it by now that it is almost a relief to smell the gas; our first reaction is to cheer the arrival of the burning sensation. There's no panic and no one is running. We make a slow

retreat of a few dozen meters before the materials to construct the first barricade of the evening are brought to the forefront. This is the beginning of a two-day battle to take back the square. We've all lost count, but probably the fifth or sixth such battle since the end of May.

The AKP government, with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at its helm, took power in Turkey ten years ago and embarked upon its long-term project of transforming the country into an exemplary Islamic neo-liberal stronghold. The latest stage of Sultan Erdoğan's vision has been a concerted attack on Istanbul through a number of urban transformation projects that

## T I M E L I N E

**May 27** – Bulldozers arrive at Gezi Park to remove a few trees as part of the government's development of Taksim Square. A few dozen friends respond immediately and stop the trees from being removed, starting an encampment that grows tenfold in each day that follows.

**May 31** – Having been brutally evicted from the park by riot police, a few hundred people attempt to hold a press conference at Taksim Square but are attacked with water cannons. Social media is buzzing with news of the attack. The neighborhoods around the square explode in spontaneous revolt; street fighting continues until early morning.

**June 1** – The Gezi Resistance recaptures the square and

the park from the police and starts to set up an occupation; thousands arrive with tents in tow. The clashes spread around Istanbul and Turkey as people march in solidarity with those defending Gezi Park.

**June 8-9** – The neighborhoods around the square have been totally transformed by graffiti and barricades, while an autonomous commune takes shape within the park. On June 8, fans from the three major soccer clubs of Istanbul converge on the square for a dramatic show of force. They have put aside previous hostilities towards each other, becoming the principal fighting force against the police, especially the fan club of Beşiktaş, *Carşı*. On June 9, there is a much larger demonstration of hundreds of thousands, this time more leftist in character. People claim this is the largest crowd the square has ever seen.



would enclose the remaining public spaces in the city. One of these was to destroy Gezi Park to make way for a commercial shopping complex in the heart of the city, Taksim Square, effectively erasing the long history and culture associated with that space.

Two months prior, in April, there were only about 300 of us at Gezi as part of a day-long festival to fight the development of the park. At that time, my comrades and I acknowledged that we were in yet another losing fight, after having been through so many. There was some energy at the festival, but we were mostly just the usual suspects. It was hard not to be cynical. At least we made a stand, we told ourselves; hopefully history will remember that some were opposed to what Istanbul was slated to become. It was just as depressing as every previous moment of the five years of AKP rule. It felt like there was no space to move, even to breathe, as Erdoğan consolidated his grip on our lives.

Although at home it felt more and more claustrophobic, the pundits of politics and economy observing from afar kept glorifying the successes of the Turkish miracle. "More than 10% annual growth rate!" "Look at Greece and Spain, Turkey is doing amazing!" Yes, Turkey has been spared the austerity measures that have been implemented in countries such as Portugal, Spain, and Greece, but this has been the result of another crisis-fighting strategy: extreme urban development through the enclosure of the city. Although initially hit by the financial crisis in 2008, the AKP government was able to keep full fiscal blowout at bay by attracting foreign liquid capital in a scheme intrinsically tied to urban development projects such as the destruction of Gezi Park.

As I observed the hundreds of thousands around me in Taksim Square, I couldn't help imagining that this might be the crucial turn from the austerity riots of the past years. Gezi was—at least in part—an uprising against the enclosure of the city in a time of an economic boom; it was not a protest demanding a return to the Keynesian dream. That said, the clock is ticking on the Turkish economy; the foreign debt holders will come knocking on the door soon. One can only hope that a population having struggled during boom-time development won't settle for a return to liquidity once a financial crisis brings about austerity.

## ***Recovering from Left Trauma***

Taksim Square is a heavy place for my parents' generation. My uncles and aunts have told me the story of the Taksim Square massacre on May Day 1977, when snipers on rooftops and the ensuing panic killed 34 people. Since then, Taksim Square has been the hotly contested zone of May Day celebrations; many of the demonstrations of the past five years have become street battles to take the square. Despite the ritualistic nature of these protests, they were instrumental in injecting life into a Left that had found itself in a rut, powerless.

At first, my relatives hadn't wanted to talk about the old militant student movement, though they had been integral to it. They claimed to have moved on from that period of their lives. But it was clear to me that rather than having moved on or even sold out, they had been crushed by the successive military coups of 1971 and 1980. Thousands of leftist

**June 11** – The police launch an operation at 7 a.m. to take back the square. Fierce clashes continue into the night, but ultimately the police hold the square.

**June 15-16** – Having occupied the square for the past four days, the police use it to stage the eviction of Gezi park at 7 p.m. The park is quickly cleared, but Istanbul explodes as the city tries to make its way to Taksim. Demonstrators cross the Bosphorus bridge for the second time in two weeks. The fighting goes on well into the next day.

**June 16** – Prime Minister Erdoğan makes his appearance at a massive rally in Istanbul in the style of a conqueror while clashes still continue across the city. He continues to defame, insult, and belittle those in the street as he has over the previous weeks.

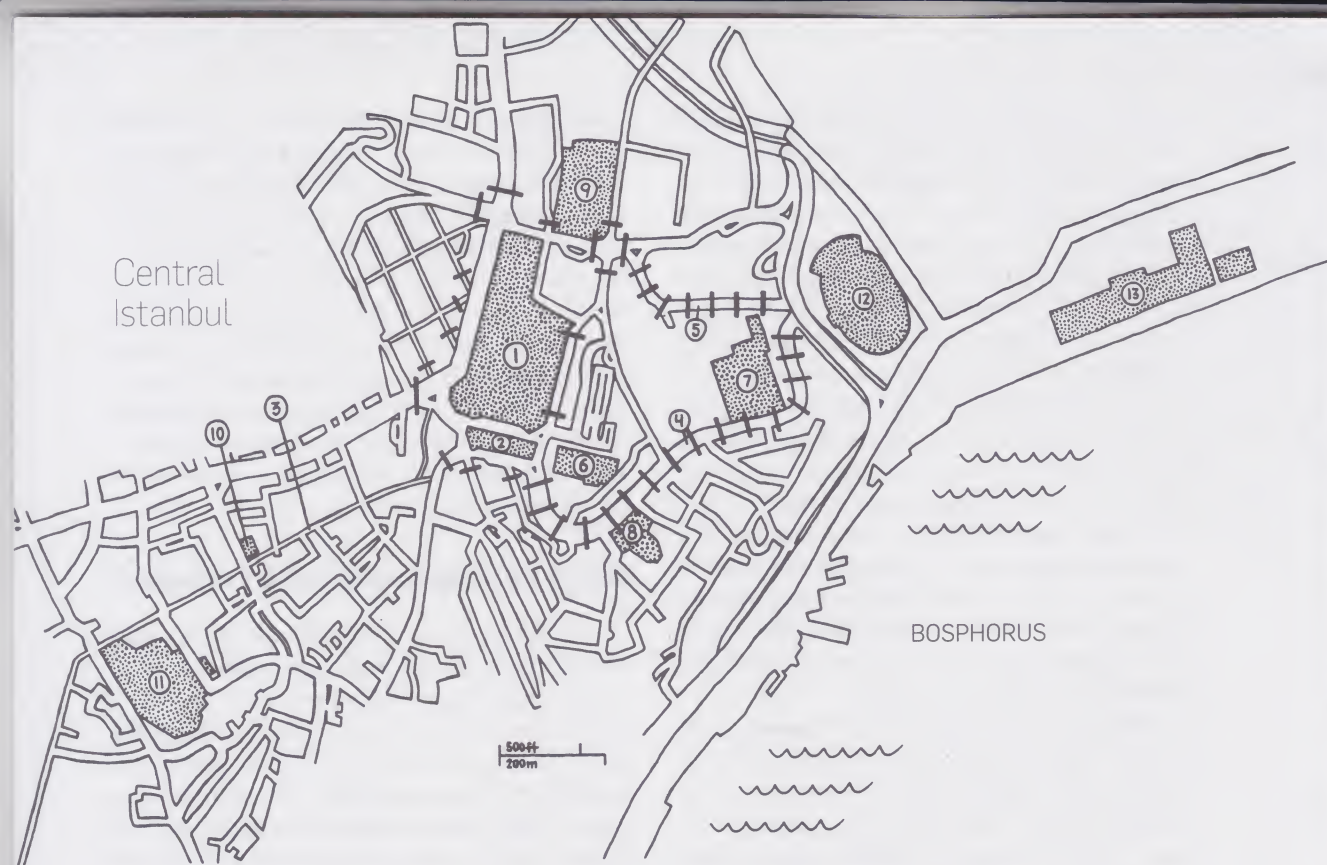
**June 18** – Through the initiative of Carşı, forums begin to take place in dozens of parks in different neighborhoods around the city. They are local in flavor, emphasizing various issues that impact the neighborhoods.

**June 30** – The Gay Pride march is larger than it has ever been, with 50,000 attending. It is as much a march for the Gezi Resistance as for the LGBT community in Istanbul, pointing to the convergence of many struggles through Gezi.

**July 8** – The beginning of Ramadan, the month of fasting for Muslims. The Anti-Capitalist Muslims mark the month by organizing people's iftars, the breaking of the fast at sunset, in public places on newspapers spread on the ground.



Central  
Istanbul



1. Gezi Park
2. Taksim Square
3. Istiklal Street
4. Barricade Road (South)
5. Barricade Road (North)

6. Atatürk Cultural Centre
7. Technical University
8. German Embassy
9. Hyatt Hotel
10. Demirören Shopping Mall

11. Galatasaray High School
12. Beşiktaş Stadium
13. Valide Sultan Mosque

— Barricades

students were rounded up, imprisoned, and tortured by the military regimes. In addition to dozens of extrajudicial paramilitary killings, military tribunals hanged more than 50 people. The trauma of the iron fist still hangs over the society in Turkey and has been blamed for the “apolitical” culture of my generation, those born in the ‘80s and ‘90s.

Cursed by what preceded it, this apolitical generation created as if out of thin air the most defiant, diffuse, and long-lasting popular uprising in the history of the country. Older leftists are still trying to wrap their heads around this. The joyful rebellion did not fit into their stale frameworks; it did not compute with their Trotskys and Lenins.

This was the beauty of the Gezi resistance. That nobody saw it coming. Not one person or group in Turkey can claim with a straight face that they predicted what transpired at the end of May and into June. The euphoria that dominated the streets of Istanbul had a lot to do with the unexpectedness of the revolt. Millions of people had their wildest wishes fulfilled overnight as if by a magical insurrectionary

genie. Isolation and depression evaporated as people found each other in the tear gas.

## Commune

Gezi Park was a beautiful commune for almost two weeks. Spontaneity and autonomy were the rules of the game; after the park was retaken, the first tents went up with the initiative of small groups of friends. The whole park rapidly filled with tents to sleep in and dozens of larger structures hosting almost every single leftist or activist group. Mutual aid was the order of this utopia. Starry-eyed old-timers and fresh militants were living a dream come true. Leaving their normal existence behind for the time being, people who had never imagined a world without police were impressed to discover a more harmonious society in the absence of the state.

The encampment at Gezi Park bore some similarities to the experience of Occupy in the US. It was an experiment in self-organization: free stores (called Revolutionary Markets), libraries, a permaculture



space, workshops, multiple kitchens, a medic tent, media production zones, and cultural events were part and parcel of the space. Yet in other respects, it was totally different from Occupy.

For example, there were no general assemblies or decision-making processes apart from those organized by the constituents of the camp in their smaller affinity or organizational groups. The central podium was an ongoing open-mic where people were free to speak as they pleased and some larger concerts and film screenings took place.

Despite the absence of a centralized decision-making body, the camp was home to many different organizations in addition to the individuals and groups of friends who were also there. The occupation resembled an open-air fair of Left, revolutionary, and identity-based groups. Each group eventually carved out a little space where members would camp and congregate.

This was especially the case while the square itself was occupied. Almost every far-left group opened up a tent with their flags flying on top. At one end of the square looms the Atatürk Cultural Center, which was adorned with dozens of banners representing many of the same groups camped out in the square and the park. What a slap in the face this must have been for Erdoğan, who had unleashed police violence for years every May Day to prevent rallies of a few hours. This surreal landscape was refreshing in that it showed a rare moment of unity among groups that evolved through sectarian split after split, stretching back to Turkey's militant-leftist 1970s. However, it was dismaying that the pissing contest between organizations promoting their names and logos continued even in these circumstances.

The Gezi occupation also differed from Occupy in class composition. While in the US, many of the occupations became de facto homeless encampments, this was not the case in Istanbul. Perhaps because the occupation broke out at the end of the school year, during the day the occupiers were mainly people in their 20s—a budding white-collar workforce slated for the malls and business plazas of AKP's future. This changed at the end of each workday when thousands of older people passed through until the late hours of the evening.

Critiques have been leveled at the Gezi Resistance for being too nationalistic in tone. While this was partly true at the onset of the uprising, it was quickly transformed by the participation of Kurdish groups. The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), the political party of the Kurdish struggle, claimed the space to the left of the entrance. Kurdish youth raised the flag of the PKK and portraits of their leader Abdullah Öcalan, imprisoned in a Turkish island prison



*Taksim Square on May Day 1977,  
the day of the massacre of 34 people.*

since 1999. For those who remembered the bloody '90s, when the majority of the 35,000 deaths from the civil war occurred, it was surreal to see the face of public enemy number one flying on flags over Taksim square. Up until recently, politicians would not even dare speak Öcalan's name in public, instead referring to him as the "head of the terrorists."

Every night, the commune transformed into a massive party and celebration. Huge circular halay dances with hundreds of Kurds singing their songs of liberation occurred at the entrance; deeper inside the park, participants consumed copious amounts of alcohol. This public drunkenness expressed defiance of the AKP and its policies of piety, but it also generated controversy, as some from the encampment wanted a more serious and less intoxicated resistance and others thought it inappropriate to be partying while comrades were still fighting the police in Ankara and elsewhere in Turkey—even in other Istanbul neighborhoods such as Gazi.

During the taking of the square and the weeks that followed, the air was thick with the excitement



## SOME OF THE PARTICIPANTS

### Carşı

Carşı is the main fan club of the football team Beşiktaş, with a 30-year legacy behind them. Despite having the Circle A in their logo (previous versions also carried a hammer and sickle), they do not identify as anarchists; the circle A simply represents their “rebel spirit.” Carşı defines itself as apolitical in the sense that it does not support any political party or ideology, yet they have a history of participating in May Day and anti-war demonstrations and opening political banners in their stadium. One of their main slogans is “CARŞI: Against everything, including itself!” Carşı gained a lot of respect during the resistance both for their bravery in street fighting and by providing a space for the soccer fans of all three major Istanbul clubs to unite against the police, putting aside their previous mutual hostility.



On June 8, fans from the three main clubs in Istanbul converged on Taksim Square for a celebratory show of force.

of a city in resistance. Indeed, “resistance” became the assumed name for what was going on; those on the streets saw themselves as part of a resistance movement against the AKP, its vision for Turkey, and its police state. This resistance was expressed in the creative energy, wit, and humor unleashed upon the walls of Istanbul. The liberated zone was visually transformed, thanks in part to street vendors who seamlessly switched from selling their usual fare of sunglasses, clothes, and tourist schwag to spray paint, helmets, and gas masks.

Wall space ran out; you had to wander around searching for a place to throw up your most recent witty slogan. Istanbul jam-packed the streets with obscure references to popular culture, internet memes, and nose-thumbing at the government. Word plays celebrated the ubiquitous teargas: “Does it come in strawberry?” Erdoğan’s statements were flung back at him, such as when he said each woman should bear three children: “I’m gonna make three kids and

### Anarchists

Anarchists were integral to the Gezi Resistance, providing the forms of prefigurative politics that shaped the commune in the park and participating at the forefront in fighting the police. Beyond the smaller crews, the most organized anarchist group was DAF—Revolutionary Anarchist Action—although the sudden emergence of the movement shocked them as much as everyone else. They set up their space right at the entrance with the Anti-Capitalist Muslims on one side and the Kurdish BDP and PKK on the other. Running three social spaces in Istanbul, they were able to provide logistical support in self-organization and also organized workshops and events on the anarchist struggle worldwide.

### LGBT Blok

The LGBT community outdid itself at every step as one of the shining constituents of the Gezi Resistance. They held down a section of the occupation at the park and fought on the barricades during some of the most crucial battles, blowing minds in a traditionally macho and homophobic society where queer people are regarded as passive and cowardly despite every example to the contrary. The annual Pride week occurred right after the eviction of the park and served an important role in keeping people in the streets. The Pride March drew more people than ever before: the first example of how movements in Turkey can count on much larger numbers and energy thanks to Gezi.

have them jump you.” Another hilarious quip waited around every corner: “Tayyip Winter is Coming,” “We’re gonna destroy the government and build a mall in its place,” “Incredible Halk,”<sup>†</sup> “You weren’t gonna ban that last beer,”<sup>‡</sup> “Everyday I’m Chapuling,”<sup>§</sup> and on and on for kilometers.

The takeover was so complete that even some of the non-sympathetic business establishments had to comply or suffer mob justice. One of the owners of a döner kebab stand at the entrance of Istiklal Avenue off of Taksim Square made the mistake of posting on Facebook about the “dogs” who had taken

\* A reference to the TV series *Game of Thrones*.

† The Incredible Hulk is detoured by replacing Hulk with Halk, the Turkish word for “the people.”

‡ The AKP has attacked the bustling street life in Beyoğlu by passing laws against alcohol consumption.

§ One of Erdoğan’s initial remarks on the uprising was to call its participants *çapulcu*, looters or marauders. Participants assumed this name for themselves, proudly proclaiming that they were all *çapulcus*.



## Anti-Capitalist Muslims

With their slogan "Allah, Bread, Justice," the Anti-Capitalist Muslims challenged both the Islamist neo-liberalism of the AKP and the conservative secularism of some within the Gezi Resistance. They emerged during the May Day



Anti-Capitalist Muslims hold Friday prayers at Gezi Park.

celebrations of 2012, drawing on a current of thought leading back to the Iranian Islamic Scholar Ali Şeriatî. They organized Friday prayers and other Islamic celebrations at the park in an effort to combat the "pious vs. sinful" polarization pushed by Erdoğan. One of their most successful initiatives occurred at the onset of Ramadan, the month of fasting, which began a few weeks after the eviction of Gezi. As a response to the government-sponsored lavish feasts to break the fast at sundown, they organized "earth tables." Throughout the month of Ramadan thousands of people around the country broke their fast together upon newspapers on the ground, sometimes directly in front of water cannons.

over and his desire to live in a Muslim country. His restaurant was reduced to rubble moments after and the board of his company had to fire him. Other businesses that did not demonstrate solidarity with the resistance were repeatedly pressured and taunted. Even Starbucks Turkey, having received some heat for not assisting protestors, had to issue a press statement expressing that it was with the resistance and would always provide support.

The fact that many from the bourgeoisie supported the uprising underscores the central contradiction of the movement. Members of the old-guard secular and liberal bourgeoisie appeared to embrace the Gezi Movement—most notably the Koç Group, one of the few family brand-name dynasties in Turkey. They went as far as providing infrastructural support by opening up their franchise of the Hyatt alongside the park to serve as a makeshift hospital. Mobile telephone providers brought cell phone transmission vans behind the barricades in order to facilitate the

## Leftist Unions

DISK and KESK are the two trade union confederations on the left that emerged from the struggles of the 1970s and '80s. DISK was the main organizer behind the 1977 May Day demonstration in Taksim Square that became the site of a paramilitary massacre. Both confederations supported the Gezi Resistance, attempting to supplement it with calls for strikes. Although two such strikes did happen during the uprising, they were completely ineffective in sabotaging the national economy; once again showing the powerlessness of traditional-form trade unions in the modern class-composition landscape.


## Müşterekler (Our Commons)

An umbrella group representing various city-based struggles in Istanbul. Many of their members belong to a budding anti-authoritarian Left scene involved in immigrant rights defense, ecological struggles, and fighting the enclosure of the city. They were involved in defending Gezi Park from development long before the struggle blew up, and were the most organized logistical group within the park due to their already extensive network among those interested in right-to-the-city activism. They attempted to push the movement further by reclaiming a derelict parcel of land within the barricaded zone. Like many other groups, they emerged from June 2013 much stronger, with new projects including a weekly news bulletin and a pirate radio station, Gezi Radio ([www.geziradyo.org](http://www.geziradyo.org)).

ever-increasing traffic of text messages and tweets. Ironically, they had to hang banners reading "This vehicle is here so that you have reception" as insurance against arson.

How could the interests of a faction of the bourgeoisie converge with those wanting to stop development in Istanbul? This was a product of an intra-ruling class conflict that had been brewing for years between green (Islamic) capital, under Erdoğan's favoritism and facilitation, and the old-guard secular capitalist class that had been sidelined and saw the Gezi uprising as an opportunity. It also reflected the desire to be part of a movement to preserve the individual freedoms and rights of modernity, recently under attack by the Islam-tinted neo-liberalism of the AKP. The fact that a part of the ruling class of Turkey supported the Gezi movement points to its success at becoming all-encompassing and also its failure to become an anti-capitalist force, despite the massive number of anti-capitalists involved.





**One of the owners of a döner kebab stand at the entrance of Istiklal Avenue off of Taksim Square made the mistake of posting on Facebook about the “dogs” who had taken over and his desire to live in a Muslim country. His restaurant was reduced to rubble moments after and the board of his company had to fire him.**

## **Barricades**

All of this transpired behind dozens of barricades set up around the liberated zone of Taksim and the park. On one of the main avenues leading into the square, İnönü Avenue, there were 15 separate barricades constructed from bricks, construction debris, busses, cars, rebar cemented down to point outwards, trash containers, and everything else. Constructed from materials passed hand-to-hand by human chains of fifty or more people, these barricades stood many meters high.

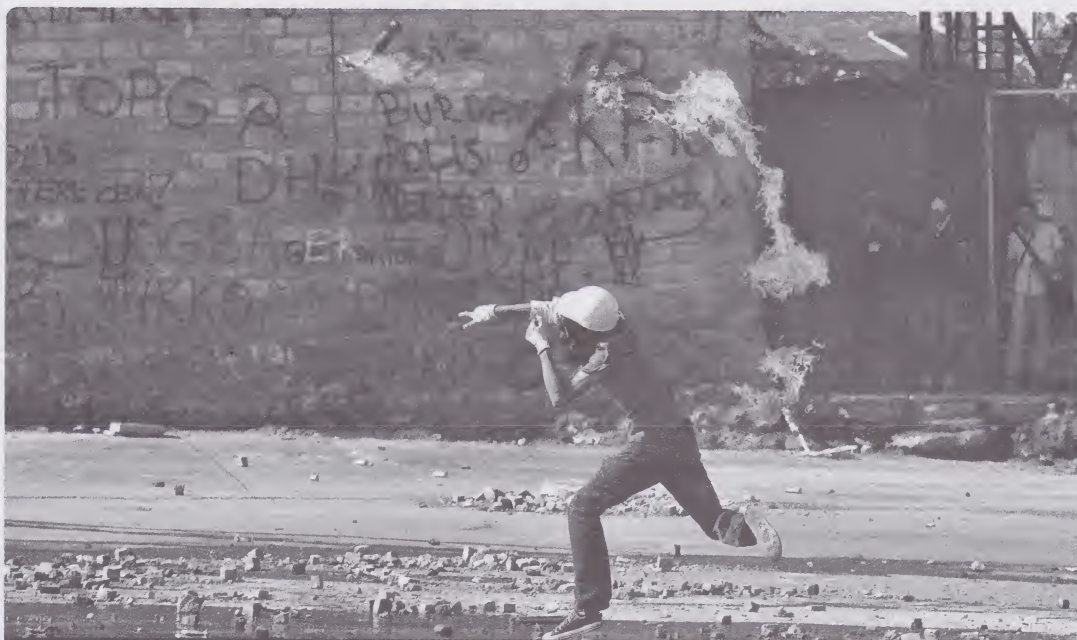
As in other cities where barricades have stood consistently, such as Oaxaca where in 2006 they were maintained for months, the barricades developed their own rebel culture. Crews of mostly younger kids or leftist militant youth claimed barricades for their own with a sense of pride and conviction. Little tents and squatted spaces storing rocks and bottles near certain barricades also provided shelter for their guardians to rest. These were the outliers, the barricades at the edge of the commune. The more central ones had been claimed with banners and flags in the leftist pissing contest.

## **Clearing the Square**

I am woken up by a comrade who tells me that the police are in the square. I rush to get there. I run across the barricade of the Socialist Democratic Party (SDP) at the edge of the square, a few hundred meters from their offices. It's a massive metal structure made of scaffoldings, concrete barriers, and other material scavenged from construction sites. Molotov cocktails are being tossed by a handful of people in front of the barricade, behind a shield that reads "SDP Public Order Enforcement." From the higher vantage point of the park, hundreds of people are watching this unfold as if at a soccer match, cheering when a Molotov explodes on the advancing water cannon and booing when the cannon attempts to ram through the barricade. A few hours later, the media posts pictures of those tossing the firebombs and the twitter feeds light up with conspiracy theories about how they are actually police provocateurs. The evidence? A bulge beneath one of their belts—supposedly a radio or firearm.

This assumption takes hold like wildfire; in no time even the international media is circulating it.





*Leftist militant or police? Many pacifists were quick to label those fighting back during the eviction of the square on June 11 as paid police provocateurs. When none of these allegations proved true, they had to reckon with the fact that they were part of a movement which included a legacy of the hard left.*

Those at the barricade eventually have to retreat into the SDP office, and 70 people are arrested in a raid. Among them is Ulaş Bayraktaroğlu, identified in pictures clearly as one of the main people throwing the Molotovs: he's a former political prisoner from the state-invented Revolutionary Headquarters case, and a member of the central committee of the SDP. The police also show a handgun they say was found among other weapons in the offices. The conspiracy theorists update their stories. Despite their determination to remain in denial, the pacifists involved in the Gezi Resistance are confronted with the fact that this movement also includes bona fide leftist militants, some of whom are involved in armed factions. So much for the spin doctors and liberal intellectuals who want to frame Gezi as Turkey's version of Occupy, who hurry to label those who fight back as provocateurs.

All day and into the night there is intense street fighting in and around the square, while inside Gezi Park a strange tranquility reigns. The calm is occasionally interrupted by medics rushing the injured from the streets into the medical area. From time to time, the police launch a barrage of tear gas into the park; some put on their gas masks so they can continue their conversations, while others rush to extinguish the canisters. In the end, the square is left to the police. All in all, it feels like another normal day at Gezi.

## Enclaves of Militancy

One evening, I go to the neighborhood of Gazi, a stronghold of DHKP-C (The Revolutionary People's Liberation Party—Front) and other leftist urban guerillas. The DHKP-C has come to resemble a death cult of martyrdom in their use of suicide bombers. Despite their undeniable ability to assassinate police, in their communiqué of support for the Gezi Resistance they said that they would not launch any attacks until absolutely necessary, as they want to see the street-fighting movement mature without such interventions. Hats off to them.

The fighting never stopped in the neighborhood of Gazi even when the reclaimed Gezi Park resembled a massive party behind barricades. Although only 19 kilometers away, Gazi is much further in class terms from the more white-collar resistance in Gezi, and has its own history and culture of resistance. A slum dating to the '60s, it was the destination of many refugees from the Kurdish civil war, and it has always been a strong enclave of the leftist Alevi population of Istanbul.

In 1995, a paramilitary drive-by attack on two cafés and a bakery left an elderly man dead before the attackers fled to the local police station. It was a provocation in the true sense, not the kind alleged by pacifists at Gezi. After the vehicle rushed to the police station, neighbors immediately gathered in





*Barricade number 4 on İnönü Caddesi with the Bosphorus Strait dividing Europe from Asia in the background. This barricade was named for Abdullah Cömert, killed on June 3 by a tear gas canister shot at his head in the southeastern city of Hatay.*

*Burnt media vans form a makeshift barricade in front of the Atatürk Cultural Center, draped in the banners of leftist organizations and other groups.*





front of it, only to be fired upon with high-caliber machine guns. Another person died on the spot and many others were wounded.

Gazi exploded. For four days, it was in open revolt, with battles against the police and the army. In the end, seventeen people were killed and the rebellion was brutally crushed, but it left a deep mark.

Some Greek comrades who go to Gazi looking for that Aegean solidarity in the flame of a bottle say that they have never seen such large Molotovs. Indeed, every evening a march starts up on the main street and becomes an urban war with fireworks, stones, slingshots, and Molotovs directed against the police and their armored vehicles, met by tear gas and a plethora of explosives and projectiles. People from the neighborhood tell me that at times both sides have also fired upon each other, but no one has caught a bullet yet.

At Gezi Park, the Gazi neighborhood has become a mythical land where superhero leftists wage war on the pigs. It's distant enough to be an Other inspiring admiration. This reminds me of how US liberals love it when the third world riots against corrupt governments, yet line up to protect the police from angry youth in their own cities. The sentiment in Turkey is not as bad as in the US though—how could it be? When the police attack Gezi, people fantasize about Gazi coming to the rescue. As usual, Twitter is the venue for rumors: "Gazi neighborhood is on the highway marching to Taksim!" "The police are totally fucked now that Gazi is coming," but the superheroes never arrive en masse.

That is, not until the last attack on the park on Saturday June 15. That day, thousands of residents from Gazi walked on the highway at night and fought their way to Taksim, finally reaching the city center by morning. They joined in with those attempting to take back the square; but even with their help, in the end we could not recapture the square for a second time.

## **Counter-Insurgency**

Tension reigned after the police took Taksim square on June 11. Everybody was waiting for the inevitable final battle. It was clear that the police had taken the square in order to prepare a staging ground from which to take back Gezi park. Walking around the encampment, you could feel the urgency. Some were collecting the most valuable things to be rescued in case of a raid; others were preparing, filling balloons with a panoply of fire accelerants. The counter-insurgency strategy of the state was in full force: Erdoğan and his cronies kept emphasizing

that naïve young environmentalists were becoming pawns in the hands of leftist terrorists, and that those who were behind all this unrest were actually the "interest lobby" or "foreign agents."

The government used outright lies to rile up its base against the Gezi Resistance. The day after the park was reclaimed for the commune, on June 1, the heaviest fighting occurred in Beşiktaş, as the soccer fan club *Carşı* tried to make its way up the hill to reach Taksim. They fought for hours in their own neighborhood, in one instance hijacking a massive bulldozer to charge the police lines. When it seemed like the police were on the verge of committing a massacre, hundreds of people fled into a nearby mosque seeking shelter. The muezzin, who sings the call for prayer, let people into the mosque and facilitated the formation of a makeshift clinic. Blood was oozing from multiple head injuries and many were vomiting from the tear gas.

This episode was brought up over and over again by the AKP and Erdoğan himself to illustrate the sinful nature of the resistance. They had entered a mosque with their shoes! They were drinking beer and having orgies! People running for their lives had entered the mosque with their shoes on, but all that transpired inside was a frantic effort to stanch bleeding wounds. Such lies were refuted even by the officials of the mosque itself and served only to infuriate those who were involved in the protests.

Erdoğan's strategy was to polarize the country by defaming the Gezi Resistance. He was counting on his 50% electoral victory, emphasizing his democratic ascension to power. Erdoğan became such a defender of democracy that when he was at his mildest, he would encourage the resistance movement to meet him at the polls in the upcoming elections. The possibility that those reclaiming Gezi and Taksim Square could be done with both the military—the brutal guardians of secular democracy—and with democracy itself, which brought autocratic neo-Islamism to power, was beyond the comprehension of those in power in Turkey. Where the experiment in autonomous self-organization will lead the rebels of Turkey is still uncertain, but the circumstances in which the struggle emerged point to a critique of democracy itself.

Meanwhile, the government was reading from the counter-insurgency playbook page by page. The AKP met with self-appointed representatives of the movement to seek concessions and prepare a pretext of failed negotiations. The commune rejected such

\* We assume that Erdoğan meant to implicate the old-guard bourgeoisie with this epithet, but also to cultivate support among those who see interest as a sin in Islam.





The evening of the police operation to clear the square, June 11. A call has been put out to converge on the square. While the numbers are at their highest, the police launch a barrage of teargas. It is a miracle that another fatal stampede didn't occur reprising the tragedy of 1977.









*The mosque of Valide Sultan is turned into a makeshift medical center treating people injured on the street. Erdoğan repeatedly accused protestors of partying and getting drunk instead.*

*Another image from the eviction of the square on June 11.*





representation outright, holding autonomous forums at seven different areas of the park to discuss how to move forward. The park was cleared while these discussions were still in their initial stages.

Although there were no “naïve environmentalists” at Gezi, there was a degree of naïve trust that the negotiations with the government could at least delay the impending attack. Consequently, the final attack came when people least expected it. The police attacked on June 15, when the park was filled with its usual evening crowd of children and the elderly. They entered Gezi Park, destroying everything and brutally beating everyone in their way. The city exploded once again, as neighborhoods started to make their way towards Taksim to participate in a battle that would last for more than a day.

## Fighting for the Commune

There was something odd about the water cannon that evening, during the eviction of Gezi Park. Instead of spraying at the fiercest members of the resistance at the front, the nozzle was directed to spray over everyone. There was no tear gas launched at that moment, yet the air was acidic, burning in our lungs. Were they using transparent teargas? Was it some new crowd control weapon?

It became clear what was happening when we saw people running into sympathetic bars, furiously stripping off their clothes soaked by the water cannon to reveal that their whole bodies were bright red. Some were convulsing, trying desperately to rub anti-acid solutions all over their skin. The next morning, the newspapers published photos of the pigs loading jugs of pepper-spray into the water cannons. The initial pepper spraying of the woman in the red dress had produced an iconic image of the resistance, which spread through social media. With no sense of irony, the police were now dousing the entire population in pepper spray from the nozzle of the water cannon.

The barricade wars went on until the first hours of the morning. After a few hours of sleep, we were back facing the tear gas and ripping up cobblestones on Siraselviler, one of the streets that lead to Taksim. It was the usual back and forth as we advanced toward the water cannons, only to be sprayed back to our original position behind the barricades. It was Father's day; some people had hung a banner for our patriarch sultan, reading “Happy Father's Day, Dear Tayyip.”

Finally, the police overcame our barricades and there was panic as they charged down the street

arresting people. I had the keys to a nearby apartment, so I gathered a group of fugitives who seemed helpless and lost and herded them into it. Eleven people around their mid-20s flooded into the apartment with relief. Peeking out the window, we saw a manhunt on the streets—plainclothes police were sweeping up everyone they found. The fugitives hadn't forgotten their manners; they clumsily took off their shoes at the door even though I insisted that it didn't matter under the circumstances. I was reminded of Erdoğan railing against the infidels who didn't take off their shoes when they went to have their orgy at the mosque.

It was a bit awkward, as none of us really knew each other; there seemed to be three or four different groups in the tiny apartment. Everyone was riled up and speaking frantically about the events of the day and the weeks past. Suddenly, I realized that some of them were nationalists; others were upset about people throwing rocks at the police. This was the spirit of the Gezi Resistance: finding yourself in the same space with people you never thought you had anything in common with. I was tempted to argue with them, but after all the teargas I didn't have it in me. Later I lamented that missed opportunity.

After the police left, we went back out into the street. It was 9 pm; as on every other night over the past three weeks, people were leaning out of their windows banging on pots and pans. Cars were honking; some residents started chants from their windows as the pot banging subsided: “Shoulder to shoulder against fascism!” “No liberation alone, either all together or none of us!”

Night had fallen. We began converging on Istiklal Avenue. Once we were a few thousand, we started marching toward the square with the conviction that it belonged to us. The police attacked with tear gas and water cannons. How many times can you experience the same sequence of events and still find joy in the face of it? A group of young and fearless street fighters headed to the front with one of those boxes of fireworks intended to be placed on the ground and watched from a safe distance. They lit it up and held it aimed at the closest water cannon, advancing slowly as bright colors exploded on the line of cops. The crowd behind them applauded wildly as we advanced to reinforce the growing barricade before setting it on fire.

The battle continued into the early morning hours until there were not enough of us left in the street. We returned home wondering what would happen the next day, and what would happen to Turkey in the future.



## ***This is Only the Beginning***

Once the police cleared the park, they continued by raiding the homes and offices of the best-known participants. The first raids were predictable: the state went to the addresses of leftist militants and groups, as it had for decades. Dozens of operations took place and many of their cadres were arrested. In addition, there were raids targeting the leaders of Carşı, the soccer fan club of Beşiktaş, as well as those who tweeted under their legal names about what was happening in the streets.

The euphoria of the Gezi resistance hasn't evaporated yet. The stories are on everyone's lips; it's all people talk about in the cafés and bars of İstiklal. During Pride Week, I attended some of the events; the theme this year was resistance. Both the trans march and the main Pride march were bigger than they had ever been: 50,000 people adorned in rainbows in the face of a traditionally homophobic Turkish society. Friends commented that this was probably the second time that there were more straight than gay people in the Gay Pride march—the first being thirteen years ago, when there were only a few dozen people, most of them allies marching in solidarity.

At the onset of the rebellion, there had been instances when anti-women, anti-sex worker, and homophobic chants could be heard in the streets. Queers and feminists intervened in various ways when this took place; they succeeded in countering this manifestation of patriarchy in a transformative way.

The story goes that during the first days of the uprising, after the police were kicked out of Taksim and the square was reclaimed for the people and barricaded, there was a moment of calm. A delegation of Carşı members took advantage of this to pay a visit to the offices of one of the main LGBT organizations in Turkey. Like other rebel identities and leftist groups, this organization also had an office in the liberated zone of Beyoğlu from which it was providing crucial infrastructural support to the uprising. Carşı entered to offer an apology for their homophobic and sexist chants. They explained that this was what they had been taught by society, but now they understood their mistake. As a token of their apology, they had brought a riot police shield.

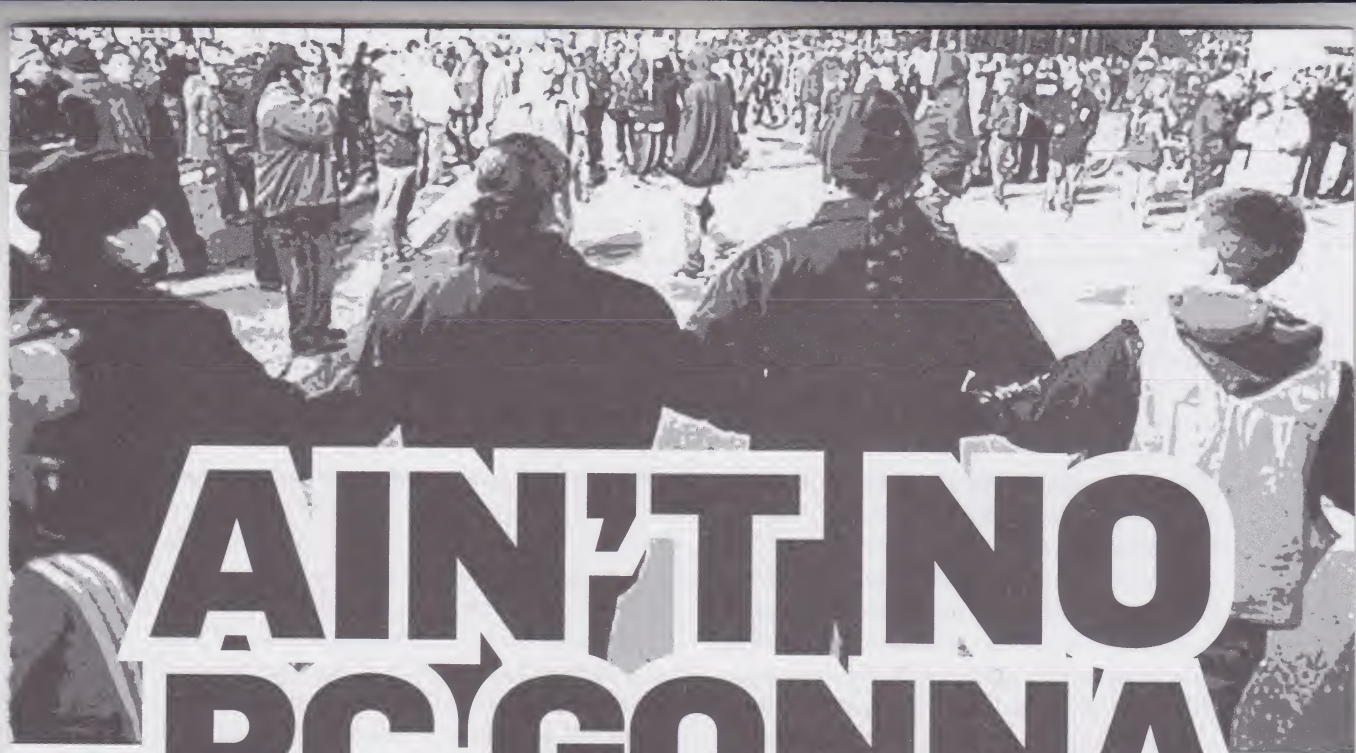
After the dust settled, I met up with a friend I'd made during the heady days of the commune, a

student from Kurdistan attending Istanbul Technical University for an engineering degree. We talked about the peace process the AKP had been crafting with the PKK since the winter. He was extremely cynical about the politicking, seeing the Gezi Resistance as the true path to peace for the Kurdish struggle. We exchanged stories we'd heard about personal transformation during the uprising. He told me about the tensions between their BDP tent, with the flags of Öcalan, and some of the Turkish nationalist elements in the Gezi occupation. That argument had become a dialogue that continued, interspersed with battles with the police, throughout the events. Suddenly finding themselves on the receiving end of state violence and a media blackout, many Turks had to come to grips with the fact that their perceptions of the war in Kurdistan had been mediated by the same corporations that were silencing them now. Sharing this space of resistance against a common enemy inspired a revolutionary reconciliation.

Yet with summer lethargy taking over, the first manifestation of the Gezi Spirit came to an end. June had left five dead and hundreds with serious injuries, some in critical condition. Physical and figurative wounds needed healing. Although from afar, it might seem that things have died down since June, on the ground there is a tense anticipation of what is to come. One challenge for the resistance will be the upcoming election cycles: municipal elections in spring 2014, and general elections a year later. All shapes and sizes of political leeches are looking to co-opt the movement.

It is incredible how the sense of nausea, helplessness, and depression that had overtaken many in the face of the steamroller of the AKP has evaporated after Gezi. It is still an open question how the Gezi Resistance will develop in the future and whether or not it will be able to further the practices first developed behind the barricades. Although one cannot predict the course of the coming years, it is unquestionable that a genie has come out of the bottle and millions have found each other. This spirit is haunting Turkey and the worst nightmares of those in power; everyone knows that Gezi will have a lasting impact on social and political life in Turkey. The Gezi Resistance is prepared for the long haul. As we reminded each other in one of the most popular chants: *This is only the beginning; continue the struggle!*





# AIN'T NO PC GONNA FIX IT, BABY

## A Critique of Ally Politics

After several recent disappointing and hurtful experiences—and to be clear, a lifetime of related minor and major run-ins with friends, comrades, and activists—I feel an unrelenting need for us to rethink how we engage with the question of otherness and our organizing. This writing takes apart the concept of “ally” in political work with a focus on race, though clearly there are parallels across other experiences of identity.

### **Charity Is to Solidarity what Ally Is to Affinity**

Thanks to experience working with indigenous and other international solidarity movements, anarchists and anti-authoritarians draw a clear line between charity and solidarity based on the principles of affinity and mutual aid. Affinity is just what it sounds like—the idea that we can work most easily with people who share our goals, and that our work will be strongest when our relationships are based in trust, friendship, and love. Mutual aid is the idea that we all have a stake in one another’s liberation

and that when we act from that interdependence, we can share with one another as equals.

Charity, by contrast, is one-sided: one shares “excess” wealth on one’s own terms. Ideologically, charity implies that others *need* the help—that they are unable to take care of themselves. This is patronizing and selfish. It establishes some people as *those who assist* and others as *those who need assistance*, stabilizing oppressive paradigms by solidifying people’s positions in them.

Autonomy and self-determination are essential to the distinction between solidarity and charity. Recognizing the autonomy and self-determination



of individuals and groups acknowledges their competence and capability. The framework of solidarity affirms that something of worth is to be gained through interactions with other groups, whether materially or less tangibly in the form of perspective, joy, or inspiration. The solidarity model also dispels the idea of *one* inside and *one* outside, foregrounding how individuals belong to multiple groups and groups overlap with one another, while demanding respect for the identity and self-sufficiency of each of those groups.

The charity model and the ally model, on the other hand, are so strongly rooted in the ideas of *I* and *the Other* that they force people into distinct groups with preordained relationships to one another. According to ally politics, the only way to undermine one's own privilege is to give up one's role as an individual political agent and to follow the lead of those more or differently oppressed. White allies, for instance, are explicitly taught not to seek praise for their ally work, especially from people of color—yet there is often a distinctly self-congratulatory air to the work of allyship, a false humility. Many white allies do their support work in a way that re-centralizes them as the only individuals willing to come in and do the hard work of fighting racism on behalf of people of color.

Whereas ally politics suggest that in shifting one's role from actor to ally one can diminish one's culpability, a liberating or anarchist approach presumes each person retains their own agency while also accounting for and responding to others' desires, revealing how our survival/liberation is fundamentally linked with the survival/liberation of others. This fosters interdependence while compelling each person to take responsibility for their own choices, with no boss or guidance counselor to blame for their decisions.

For a liberating understanding of privilege, each of us must learn our stake in toppling those systems of power, recognizing how much we all have to gain in overturning every hierarchy of oppression. For many people, this requires a shift in values. A rights-based discourse around equality would lead us to believe that we could all become atomized middle-class post-racial families who are either straight- or gay-married.\* But anyone who's been on the bottom knows there's never enough room

\* This sounds like the dream of the mainstream civil rights movement: black and brown politicians equally in control of the military, the police, and the prisons; or the dream of the mainstream feminist movement: lipstick and respect in the boardroom. Unsurprisingly, anarchists have always been on the fringes of mainstream rights-based movements, pushing for a more holistic analysis that inevitably necessitates more radical action.

**The ally framework individualizes the structures of oppression, shifting the discussion from how to attack those structures to emphasize individual behavior instead! This focus on individual privilege has become such a popular political discourse precisely because it does not necessarily question the structures that produce that privilege.**



for everyone on the top—or even in the middle.<sup>†</sup> A collective struggle for liberation can offer all of us what we need, but it means seeking things that can be shared in abundance—not privileges that are by definition limited resources, such as wealth and social legitimacy that are only available on account of others' poverty and marginalization.

## Allyship as Identity

The concept of allyship is embedded in the rights-based<sup>‡</sup> discourse of identity politics. It assumes that there are fixed groups of people (black people, women, gay people...) who are structurally oppressed in our society, and that we must work across these differences in identity to achieve equality for all. In the discourse of ally politics, this responsibility falls especially on those who benefit from those structural oppressions. Thus allyship is born as an adjunct of identity—and as an identity unto itself.

Allyship centers on the idea that everyone's life experiences are shaped by their perceived identities, and thus someone with an identity that is privileged in our society cannot understand the experiences of someone with an identity that is oppressed. However, there is no "essential" experience of belonging to any of these categories. Oppression runs along countless axes, and the subtleties of our experiences are irreducible—which makes a strong case for listening to and trusting each other wherever we possibly can.

A good ally learns that if one can never understand the implications of what it is to walk through this world as an oppressed \_\_\_\_ [person on the receiving end of a specific oppression], the only way to act with integrity is to follow the leadership of those who are oppressed in that way, to support their projects and goals, to always seek out their suggestions and listen to their direction.

This gets very complicated, very quickly, as soon as the aspiring ally starts navigating through the world and discovers that there is no singular mass of black people, latino folks, or "people of color" to take guidance from, and that people within a single identity not only disagree with each other, but often have directly conflicting desires and politics. This means that one cannot be a white ally (for example) as an identity; one can be an ally to specific people of color in specific situations, but not to people of color as a whole category.

<sup>†</sup> For every Scandinavia, there must be an Africa—even if there are parts of Africa in Scandinavia and vice versa.

<sup>‡</sup> Subtly implicit in the language of rights or formal equality—masking deeper inequalities—is the necessity of the State or some other external entity that promises us these rewards for our loyalty.

## Legitimacy, Justification, Authority

In seeking oppressed groups to take direction from, white folks often end up tokenizing a specific group whose politics most match their own. "What does the NAACP [or Critical Resistance, or the Dreamers] think about this?" Likewise, they may latch onto the most visible "leaders" of a community because it is quicker and easier to meet the director of an organization, the minister of a church, or a politician representing a district than to build real relationships with the people those leaders purport to represent. **This approach to dismantling racism structurally reinforces the hierarchical power that we're fighting against by asking a small group to represent the views of an entire category of people with radically different lived experiences.**

When learning how to *appropriately take leadership from those more affected by oppression*, activists may seek out the leader of a community not simply because it's the easiest approach, but also because—whether they admit it to themselves or not—they are not just looking for guidance, but also seeking to legitimize their own political projects and analysis. Sometimes they are looking for legitimacy in the traditional sense, by siding with others who carry more mainstream social or political capital. Other times they are seeking the legitimacy of siding with those who offer the most anti-oppression credibility—and the goal of opposing oppression morphs into a strange political competition in which we valorize oppressed identities to such an extent that people strive to be identified as oppressed, or at least to be allied with the "most oppressed."

As an ally gaining an anti-oppression education, each person learns how they benefit from the oppression of others because of the way our society values certain identities. Allies must come to terms with the fact that they are granted privilege in our society simply because of how they look or where their family comes from—and there is nothing they can do to fully refuse or redistribute those privileges, because they are recreated across society. The knowledge that one has advantages others can never have, which one has done nothing to deserve, often produces a deep sense of white guilt.

This sense of guilt, coupled with the idea that the only ethical way to act is to take direction from others, can make one feel powerless. The model of ally politics puts the burden of racism onto white folks, intentionally flipping the social hierarchies, emphasizing that white allies can never escape this deep inequality but offering at least a partial absolution



## leadership

Perhaps you've watched or participated in organizing that seeks to *develop the leadership* of individuals who live in a specific neighborhood or work in a particular kind of labor force. This language seems to offer the benevolence of the skills of the organizing group to those who haven't been exposed to such ideas. In fact, it is coded language describing a reductive and authoritarian approach imposing an organizing model on a group of people from the outside. It also conveniently creates spokespeople who can then be used to represent the whole of that (often heterogenous) body of people. Over the last several decades, an entire elite class of politicians and spokespeople has been used to politically demobilize the communities they claim to represent.

Anti-authoritarian white allies often express that they are working with authoritarian or nonpartisan community groups, sometimes on projects they don't believe in, because the most important thing is for them to follow the leadership of people of color. The unspoken implication is that there are no anti-authoritarian people of color—or none worth working with. Choosing to follow authoritarian people of color in this way invisibilizes anarchist and antiauthoritarian people of color; it also functions to marginalize and suppress efforts from less powerful or influential members of these communities. In this way, white allies diminish the agency and leverage of people of color who disagree with the established, institutionalized groups, reinforcing hierarchies of legitimacy and policing the boundaries of political approach by throwing the weight of their privileges behind those who already have more power. There is at least as broad a range of political ideologies in communities of color as in white communities, but no one would ever assume that there is a *single* white community or that there are “representatives” capable of speaking for all white people as a whole.

for allies who can stick to this script: *Listen to people of color. Once you've learned enough from people of color to be a less racist white person, call out other white people on their racism. You will still be a racist white person, but you'll be a less racist white person, a more accountable white person. If nothing else, you'll gain the ethical high ground over other white people so you can tell them what to do.* This model has repeatedly failed to equip would-be allies to do more than seek their own endlessly deferred salvation.

Being an ally has come to mean legitimizing a political position by borrowing someone else's voice—always acting in someone else's name without questioning the principle of appropriating others' struggles. It's a way of simultaneously taking power and evading personal accountability. The idea of allyship obscures the fact that hidden choices are being made about who is being listened to, inculcating the idea that there is a single “community of people of color” sharing common interests who could be properly represented by leaders, rather than a heterogenous mass with overlapping and sometimes deeply contradictory ideas. This re-positions the white ally to wield the power of determining who the most representative and appropriate black and brown voices are. And who are white allies to determine who is the most appropriate *anything*?





On Sunday, July 14, in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer and the widespread and consequence-less murder of black and brown youth in our society, our small city witnessed the collision of a rowdy, angry demonstration and a somber, sedentary speak-out. The speak-out was intended to be a space where individuals could give voice to their sorrow and pain, be held by friends and strangers, find solace in one another. The marching crowd was lively, vocalizing rage with a palpable energy to release.

In the short stretch from the plaza to the courthouse, folks of a variety of ages, racial and ethnic groups, and genders found pace in the streets together, resolute in our desire for rebellion on this day of ferocious mourning. The incongruent energies of the two very different events met each other abruptly. As the march arrived, small groups tumbled into the speak-out, meeting and chatting with one another. This suddenly overflowing crowd began situating itself, joining the group on the sidewalk and settling into the street in front of it.

The march was clearly an uninvited disruption, and the friend who was holding the space of the speak-out, a prison abolitionist and organizer from a radical African-American cultural organization, was encouraging people to quiet down and move onto the sidewalk so the speak-out could continue. Among hesitant attempts to bring the clatter down, the noise of the new crowd slowly began to lower; but rather than giving space for a true silence to settle, a few white allies came to the edge of the sidewalk, physically and verbally corralling people out of the street and shouting such choice phrases as, "Shut up! Have some respect! You're all idiots!"

Their comments were pointedly directed to the white folks in the street, though the crowd in the street included people of many races. Did this make them uncertain to how to proceed without clear guidance from a single, united community of color? What does the white ally handbook say you should do when groups of people of color are actively engaged in conflict? In this case, white allies gave preference to the elder, the one with the most important reputation.

Personally, I think the most respectful thing would have been to get out of the way.

Perhaps these white allies thought that's what they were doing by addressing their directives solely to the white people in the street. However, the march had been tailed by an irritated brigade of bike cops, who were also nudging folks onto the sidewalk. White allies guilted many demonstrators out of the street, physically attempting to move

some people in close proximity to the police officers who had been trying to do the same thing<sup>\*</sup>—without yet putting their hands on anyone. The effect of this was to leave me and another woman of color isolated in the streets with only the police around us because all of our comrades had been pushed away.

After listening to many many speeches, the crowd began to get restless, though folks didn't want to disrespectfully leave before the speak-out ended. Some of the folks who had marched from the plaza to the speak-out, including several mothers of youth being held in the jail, rallied the crowd to march to the jail, and a few people continued the speak-out as many folks from it joined the marching crowd in taking the demonstration out into the night.

Did the black folks at the speak-out need a few young white folks to speak for them? Certainly none of us needed white radicals to do the police's job for them.

## Community Policing and Power

Perhaps the least legible aspect of ally politics is the tendency for people who otherwise seem to aspire to relationships free of domination to try to exert control over others. Is it because when we feel like we occupy the most legitimate or most objectively justified position<sup>†</sup>, it is easy to inflate our sense of righteousness? Or is it that we feel that when we have the most information—or the most connections—we can make decisions for others better than they can make them themselves? (ick!)

Respecting individual and group autonomy means that we don't need managers. It means that no matter how well-positioned or knowledgeable we believe ourselves to be, we understand that people can communicate and resolve conflicts best when speaking with humility from their own direct experiences. Some of the first skills taught in conflict resolution, facilitation, and de-escalation trainings are how not to speak for others. Good mediators learn that you break trust when you try to represent others without their consent.

During the anti-globalization movement at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I often found myself in baffling arguments about "violence" with pacifists or others who self-described as adhering to a strict code of non-violence. Many of the same folks who argued that we shouldn't do anything that could hurt someone else's property consistently yelled at other people

<sup>\*</sup> Never put your hands on anyone in front of the police—especially people you understand to be even vaguely on your side.

<sup>†</sup> Often, according to a strangely quantitative evaluation of who is most wronged by social oppressions.



so aggressively as to make them feel threatened; some also engaged in emotional manipulation and passive-aggressive maneuvers in meetings and during demonstrations. Several times, I saw “non-violent” demonstrators physically hurt other protestors, at-

possible to create space where some people could be in the street and some could be on the sidewalk, several people shifted immediately into control and management mode, increasing the antagonism and artificially creating two opposing sides.

In retrospect, there were numerous ways we could have worked through this respectfully with better communication both before and during the march. The conflict brought up important questions about how to navigate multiple risk levels within a single event, build trust that can translate into plans for safety in the streets, and organize exit strategies that accommodate different groups of people. But the communication by some people on behalf of others dramatically escalated the situation.

While the march was still in progress, somehow I was tasked with talking to members of a different organization who work in a nearby neighborhood with undocumented folks. I approached a group of people who were visibly upset that others remained in the streets, and I had a brief, but intense interaction with a man I'd never met before. I don't remember the exact words we exchanged, but I remember calmly approaching him, asking him if we could speak about what was going on. He responded by screaming in my face.

After walking away from that interaction, I turned to a woman from the same organization to try again to see if we could strategize a workable solution. She launched into a tirade about how I must not understand the disproportionate police harassment that people of color—especially undocumented people—would face if the police chose to attack the march that day. With hard-to-veil irritation, I asked her if she had ever personally experienced police violence or had ever spent time in jail. When she answered, “no,” I told her how ridiculous it felt for her to make such baseless assumptions about me when I had more stories than I cared to share about police violence in both social and political contexts relating to race and gender. Then I asked her what kind of conversation she expected we could have when she was speaking so stridently about experiences that weren't even hers. She apologized and said that she would just rather talk after the march was over.

After the march, my housemate told me a story from the day that I can only explain as a temporary loss of perspective. While she was walking in the street with her five year-old nephew, a mutual friend of ours who was frustratedly trying to redirect everyone off the street and onto the sidewalk approached her. With a bullhorn to her mouth, this friend shouted at my housemate to get out of the street. At this point,

tempting to drag them out of the streets for spray painting a wall or breaking a window.

Why do people feel justified trying to pacify others—even when they know very little about them? Such vehement attempts to contain others' rage and rebellion often needlessly escalate conflict between those who should be able to struggle together, not against each another.

A few years ago, at a May Day march in our town, an unnecessary conflict erupted out of attempts to negotiate within a large crowd about whether or not some should continue marching in the street without a permit. A group of organized undocumented folks asked others to stay out of the street because they didn't want to risk arrest. In this minimally policed and low-tension situation, rather than beginning conversations about whether it was



*Oakland, January 14, 2009: Orange-vested volunteers, including aspiring “allies,” attempt to control a multiracial crowd protesting the murder of Oscar Grant.*



my housemate said to me with some confusion and sadness, "I thought she was coming to talk to me, but she didn't even say hello to me. She didn't speak my name. She pretended that she didn't know me. I know she knows who I am, but she acted like I was just a body, separated from our hearts."

## Not Trying to Get Comfortable— Trying to Get Free

"We are told that resistance lies in 'speaking truth to power' rather than attacking power materially. We are told by an array of highly trained 'white allies' that the very things we need to do in order to free ourselves from domination cannot be done by us because we're simply too vulnerable to state repression. At mass rallies, we're replayed endless empty calls for revolution and militancy from a bygone era while in practice being forced to fetishize our spiritual powerlessness."

— from the zine, *Escalating Identity*

Revolutionary struggle is indeed *radically unsafe*. It is a project that can and does mean prison or death for some of us, and it is important to be aware that these risks can intensify based on where people are situated

in the matrixes of oppression. However, the concept and role of ally politics has distorted this awareness into a practice of collective policing by would-be-managers who are shielded from criticism by the authority of a depersonalized, stereotyped Other.

The ally framework individualizes structures of oppression, shifting discussion away from how to attack those structures and emphasizing individual behavior instead. The focus on individual privilege has become such a popular political discourse precisely because it does not necessarily question the structures that create that privilege. It is essential to understand how we are shaped by systematic forms of oppression, but the point is to collectively dismantle the structures of domination that produce and perpetuate those privileges. Individual transformation can only happen concurrently, not prior to this.

We all experience fear and doubt, and wanting to relinquish our responsibility for the choices we make is a natural response to those feelings; but we must hold those fears as our own, as we must hold our desires for freedom as our own. When we act on behalf of an imagined "other," it makes honest communication around tactics, strategy, and solidarity impossible, shattering our relationships and fueling mistrust where there could be affinity. Our relationships are not what we need to be breaking.

## Profile of the Counter-Rioter according to the US Riot Commission Report of 1968

**The typical counter-rioter, who risked injury and arrest to walk the streets urging rioters to "cool it," was an active supporter of existing social institutions. He was, for example, far more likely than either the rioter or the noninvolved to feel that this country is worth defending in a major war. His actions and his attitudes reflected his substantially greater stake in the social system: he was considerably better educated and more affluent than either the rioter or the noninvolved.**



# Just because you feel like you're the one who broke it doesn't mean you can fix it

Growing up in this culture, we're taught so much hatred for the parts of ourselves and others that are different from the mainstream or dominant culture. We learn what it means to have good hair or a good nose; we're told our lightest-skinned sibling is the most beautiful; we're taught shame about the size and shape of our bodies, about who and what we desire. White supremacy, misogyny, and all the ideologies that create "the Other" are at once superficial and incredibly rooted within us.

It is inevitable that as we develop a critical analysis of the various axes of identity—race, gender, class, ability, and more—that we will experience deeply personal and political moments of self-realization about ourselves and our relationships with others, as well as about the way this culture functions. It is important and positive that we make those kinds of developments in identifying how oppression works, internally and externally. However, we must not get so caught up in our own self-discoveries that we unthinkingly put those breakthrough moments on others who live daily with the realities we are just beginning to understand.

Trayvon Martin became a symbol for this generation of the normalcy of violence perpetrated against criminalized, black bodies. The events around his death and his murderer's acquittal were dramatically emotional for many of my younger white friends; it was clearly a moment of realization about something big. In conversations with other friends of color, however, the pain of the unexceptionality of this case was always at the forefront. We all know this is standard treatment for youth of color. A young friend of mine put it best when he said, "Of course I'm mad; I'm always mad at the police. But I don't know why anyone is surprised. This is how we're always treated. I just wish those white girls would stop crying and get up."

*A few tips:*

**Slow down.** Don't try to fix it. Don't rush to find an answer, or act out of your guilt. Remember that many of your comrades have been doing this work for a long time, and experience the kind of oppression you're learning about more acutely than you. It didn't start with you and isn't going to end with you.

**Keep it internal.** Don't take up too much space with your thoughts and emotions. Be sensitive to the fact that folks are in a variety of places in relation to what you're working through; don't force conversations on others, especially through the guise of public organizing.

**Write about it.** Give yourself the unedited space to feel all the things you need to, but know that it may hurt others if you share your feelings unthinkingly.

**Read about it.** Look for resources from people of a variety of political ideologies and experiences of identity to challenge yourself and get the widest range of input.

**Listen to older people.** Listening to stories from your 80-year-old African-American neighbor when you're working through questions around racism will likely be thought provoking, regardless of their political ideology or your life experience. Don't underestimate what a little perspective can do for you.

**Don't make your process the problem of your comrades.** Be careful not to centralize yourself, your stake in fixing the problem, or your ego. Work it out on your own and with close friends and mentors.



All you see are demographics  
All you hear is "systems"  
Without undressing me down to the sum of my parts you cannot achieve that  
checking-your-privilege erection.  
You defend dogma cuz it's all you've got left  
But  
Humanity won't fit into data bars or scripted syllabi  
And won't stick around when you can no longer see it.  
Undressing us all with your politics you become the most correct  
And also an entity you'd probably hate—could you escape for a moment.  
You steal our dignity and undermine our friendship  
When the dots connect  
And I see you seeing me through the activist gaze.  
I'm not the beating heart I feel  
Your eyes just reflect a female queer blob of color.

– Rakhee Devasthali











BOB-ARTO  
COOTZ\*  
KIRK  
LAIL

# **How Do We Fight Gentrification?**



There are fights it is impossible to win and impossible to avoid. Gentrification is one of these. It is a ceaseless earthquake, breaking up communities, shaking us from one neighborhood to another or into outright homelessness. The ones who take our place face the same fate in our wake.

We have to reimagine these defensive struggles as offensive initiatives—that's the only way they could turn out to our advantage. What could we gain in fighting, even as the ground is snatched from beneath our feet? How could these losing battles position us to take on the structures that produce gentrification?





## Prologue: Setting Our Priorities

Gentrification is one of the most pressing issues facing anarchists in the US, and one of the most paralyzing. All around the world, people are being forced from their homes by the rising cost of living as development changes the character of neighborhoods. We often find ourselves swept up in this process, displacing poorer people with less racial privilege only to be pushed out ourselves when the next wave hits. For more and more of us, engaging with this topic is not a choice, but a matter of survival.

Essentially, gentrification is the process of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer embodied in real estate. It's produced in part by the asymmetrical dynamics between race and class—for example, when poor white people pave the way for middle-class white people in formerly non-white neighborhoods, though the same dynamics can play out between other demographics. Gentrification is polarizing because it can reveal real differences in goals and strategy about the most controversial issues of our time: race and class, leadership and autonomy.

One common response is a sort of consumer politics: we blame those who move into neighborhoods that are “not theirs.” But this focuses on the last stage of the process, not the forces driving it. What do we expect renters to do if they can't afford to stay in their previous neighborhoods? Should poor white gentrifiers work higher-paying jobs so they can afford to stay in predominantly white neighborhoods? Setting aside the question of whether that would be desirable, it often isn't even *possible*.

Much anti-gentrification rhetoric implies a static notion of community, something monolithic and changeless. But not even the ecosystems that were here before the first cities were static. A narrative of mere conservation is reactive and doomed to fail, especially in our era of maximum fluidity and circulation. Change is inevitable, and categories of who belongs and who doesn't should be anathema to us. We need a more precise way of framing what is destructive about imposed development, and to juxtapose a transformative narrative of our own.

In short, we can't halt the effects of capitalism simply by pitting moral imperatives against economic pressures. To put a stop to gentrification, we would have to abolish capitalism itself. Instead, let's begin by asking what we hope to get out of gentrification struggles, in hopes of formulating a strategy that is offensive rather than defensive. Here are some possible goals around which an anti-gentrification struggle might cohere.

We might seek:

**To memorialize what is being destroyed**—for example, by creating “memory projects” or museums about the former inhabitants and character of the neighborhood. Frequently adopted by non-confrontational initiatives, this approach at least acknowledges gentrification; but without an emphasis on ongoing struggles, it can promote resignation rather than resistance.

**For people with comparative racial and class privilege to support the initiatives of those who have less.** This often takes the problematic form of accepting the leadership of recognized “community leaders” who don't necessarily have the same interests as less influential locals. Supporting the initiatives of those who are not positioned as “community leaders” can bring all sorts of messy internal conflicts to the surface—which may be a good thing.

**To prevent the displacement of the most vulnerable inhabitants**—or else the “original” ones, who may not be the most vulnerable.

**To slow or freeze development.** This could dictate a legalistic strategy or a confrontational one, according to circumstances and the politics of the participants. Like the former goal, this is comparable to environmentalists trying to save specific areas of wilderness: with a great deal of effort and leverage, it is sometimes possible to win concessions from corporations or the state, though these are usually temporary and the consequence is often that development simply intensifies elsewhere.

**To get revenge upon developers as an end in itself.**

**To build ties on the basis of the struggle against gentrification.** This is worthwhile, although there are obvious structural challenges in seeking to found connections on the very process that is breaking up and dispersing a community.

**To connect struggles over housing and land to other struggles** relating to work, environment, or public space. This could mean intensifying the general hostility towards policing and surveillance in embattled neighborhoods, or fostering hostility to developers and landowners in such a way as to build support for autonomous spaces and infrastructure such as occupied gardens, social centers, or housing complexes.



To set precedents for struggle that can be inspiring wherever gentrification is taking place—such as developing practices of autonomous communal assembly and decision-making, or popularizing specific offensive tactics.

Selecting from and adding to this list might help anarchists to evaluate their effectiveness and chart a course consistent with their long-term strategies.

In the following story, told from the perspectives of five participants, some anarchists in a gentrifying neighborhood set out to fight the most egregious development project by any means necessary.

## Pyrrhic Victories

### Small-Town Anarchists Take on Green Capitalist Developers: A Story in Five Voices ★ ❁ 🍷 🍷 🍷

Chapel Hill is a medium-sized college town nestled between bigger cities in the central piedmont of North Carolina. It has always had a modest reputation for radical politics, and over the past decade it has become a local hub of anarchist activity. Meanwhile, facilitated by the influx of student loan money, property values have risen more quickly in Chapel Hill than the surrounding areas, steadily forcing out the town's poor and black populations. The following story was just one in a series of space-oriented conflicts in which anarchists have participated; it was preceded by a multi-year showdown with town officials over use of the so-called Town Commons for monthly Really Really Free Markets (see *Rolling Thunder* #4), and followed by high-profile building occupations around the Occupy movement of 2011-2012. The Northside neighborhood, in which the action takes place, is less than a mile from the university, across the main commercial street.

May 2011 ★

I wake up to strangers' voices. Someone is in our house. It's the people from the rental company—they're showing it to potential buyers. They didn't warn us, didn't knock, just let themselves in.

I have no recourse; my name isn't on the lease, and we're over permitted occupancy. I should be driving them out, and instead I'm trying to figure out how to hide the fucking cat food bowl without being seen. My ex and I were already kicked out of one apartment complex in this town for being one tenant too many. Like so many other poor people in this country, I can't afford to

invoke my legal rights. Most of the other renters I knew on this street are already gone, forced out by landlords eager to take advantage of soaring real estate values. The first ones to go were the black families; now poor households of predominantly white folks are disappearing.

This neighborhood is called Northside. It was built a century ago, primarily to house black service workers at the nearby university. During segregation, it was a center of black culture and economy. I'm told James Brown and Ella Fitzgerald performed here, a block from my house.

I've been connected to this neighborhood since I was ten; my mother enrolled me in the swim team at the community center here. We used to race against teams from the middle-class swimming pools—one of them was actually called Country Club. That's not to say I shared the same reality as young black folks who lived around here; the one I knew best in elementary school was shot to death at the McDonald's up the street, something unthinkable for a white kid like me.

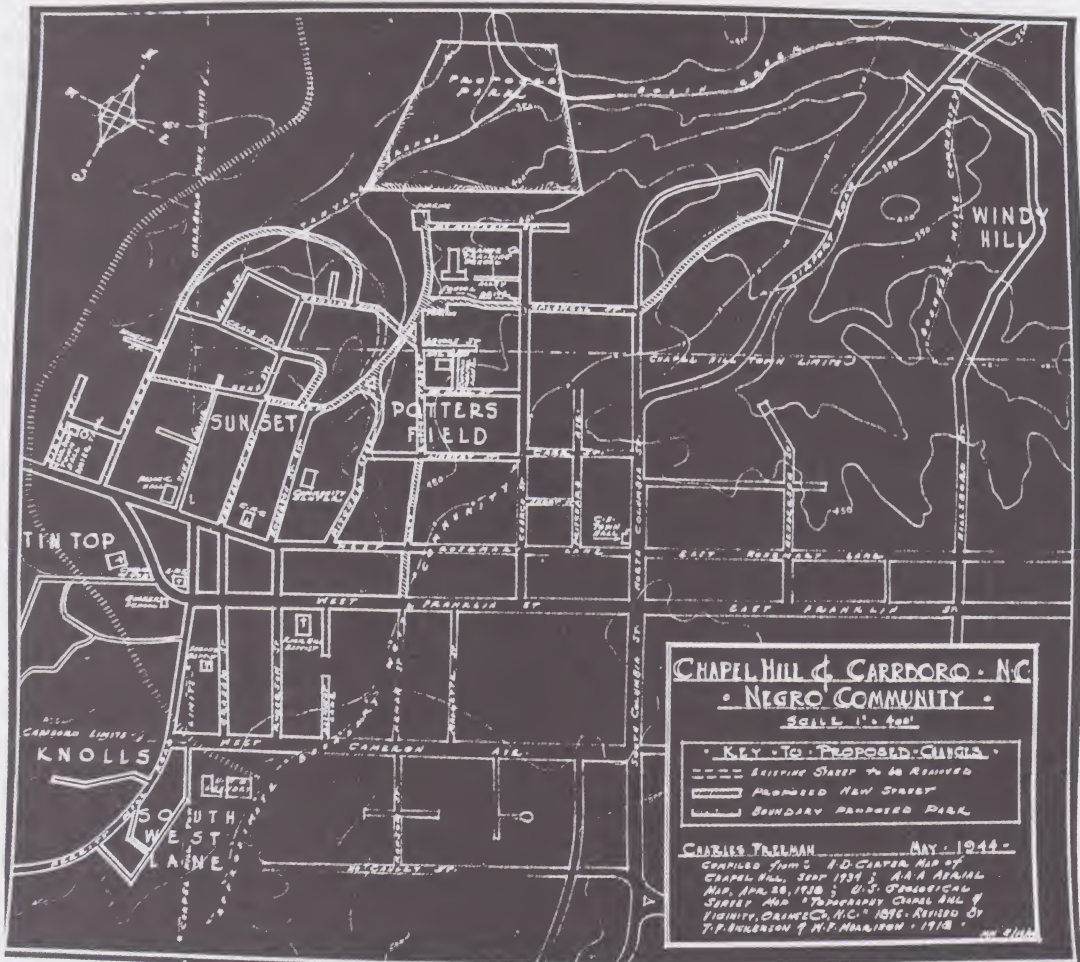
A decade and a half later, in the 1990s, I moved here with my partner, after the fiasco in which we were kicked out of her apartment. We were right next to the projects; our neighbors would come over to use our landline to order pizza or call their families. When white students moved in across the street, the neighborhood kids hassled them and took stuff off their porch; but one night I left my computer in the front yard—my only valuable possession—and it was still there the next day. It was nice to feel welcome.

Another decade and a half has passed since then. Now the houses of the neighbors who used our phone have been flattened and replaced with fancy pop-up condominiums full of white students. The church and the Ethiopian restaurant have been flattened, too, along with a whole block of the former black business district. In their place, casting its shadow across my present house and the remnants of what was a multiethnic working class neighborhood, is a ten-story green capitalist monstrosity: *Greenbridge*.

November 1990 ❁

Long before this story begins, when Northside was still predominantly black, the Chapel Hill police carried out a SWAT team attack against it under the name "Operation Ready-Rock." In *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*, Christian Parenti describes this as one of the most egregious fishing expeditions of its era. The warrant allowed the police to search every person and vehicle on a full block; as the warrant request put it, "We believe that there are no 'innocent' people at this place."





Map of the neighborhood from 1944, circulated by Hidden Voices in their multimedia performance narrating local black history, "Because We're Still Here (and Moving)"

Dressed in combat boots, green camouflage battle uniforms, body armor, hoods, masks, goggles, and Kevlar helmets, 45 officers armed with a wide array of weapons stormed the block from all directions, cutting off every path of escape and combing the area with drug-sniffing dogs. Whites were allowed to leave, while more than a hundred black people were searched. SWAT commandos smashed in the front door of a pool hall and forced the occupants to the floor at gunpoint. While the captives were searched and interrogated, the bar was ransacked. The commotion left one elderly man trembling on the floor in a pool of his own urine.

The raid netted thirteen arrests for minor drug possession. Some of those who had been terrorized and humiliated filed a class action suit, but no officers were ever so much as reprimanded.

A decade and a half later, developers bought the land that had been the site of that raid in order to build Greenbridge, what they hoped would be a

pioneering beacon of green capitalist profit and sustainability. In this sequence, it's easy to see the direct connection between the so-called War on Drugs targeting black communities and the gentrification subsequently displacing them. In the end, the illegal drug dealing that had made the neighborhood an unattractive target for developers may have disrupted the community less than the development facilitated by invasive efforts to "clean it up."

Spring 2007 ★

We moved into that house around the same time the developers were buying up the block at the end of the street. We took over renting from a white couple in grad school; they were getting married and moving somewhere "nicer." As a household of local anarchists who had already been living together, we were excited to find a house we could afford in a multiethnic working class neighborhood. We knew it was being



gentrified, but we didn't think it would help for us to leave the house to another pair of grad students. Instead, we intended to make our presence cost developers more than it benefitted them. We can't always choose the positions we occupy in the economy, but we can choose how we occupy them.

We got to know our neighbors swiftly. Three houses were occupied by families recently arrived from a small town in central Mexico; one of the young men sometimes slept on our couch when he came back too late. On the other side of us was a ninety-year-old African-American woman who had lived there since the first houses were built in the neighborhood; her sister and cousin still lived on the street. She generously shared stories with us on her front porch, recounting her youth in the countryside picking cotton and the neighborhood's early days.

Across the street, there were two houses occupied by a revolving cast of students, who passed through too quickly to be worth trying to get to know, and one house occupied by black renters. Like our house and the households from Guanajuato, their house always had a crowd hanging out in front. First the kids came out to join us when we played badminton in the road; eventually, we became friends with the older folks, who would have us watch the youngest when there was trouble.

There was a police substation at the end of the street, part of their efforts to colonize and subdue the neighborhood—but when a conflict escalated to gunfire in front of our neighbors' house one night, the police took more than half an hour to show up. On the other hand, one morning I got into it with some officers who were groundlessly frisking and insulting a young black man on our street. When they let him go in order to fuck with me, he stuck around to record it on his phone. We didn't know each other, but in moments like that, the neighborhood felt cohesive.

I was the only one in our house who had actually grown up in town—not unusual, in a region seeing so much change. Some of the language criticizing gentrification centered on the displacement of locals, but I thought that was the wrong narrative—I didn't want to risk giving anyone ammunition to delegitimize our Mexican neighbors' right to be there, for example. For me, the most important thing was the working class character of the neighborhood—affordability and solidarity—not some static notion of who belonged.

Then we learned that the formerly black-owned business district at the end of our street was going to be leveled. A group fronted by a dot-com millionaire named Tim Toben had received the go-ahead to build a \$56 million “sustainable” condominium complex with units between \$300,000 and \$1.4 million apiece.

Over the following months, the implications of this set in. Rents that had already been rising would soar; more people would lose their homes. At the same time, the development gave us a clear target to focus on—all the more egregious in that it framed environmental responsibility as a selling point for the wealthy, offering the narrative of sustainability to help rich people feel good about themselves as they profited at the expense of those who could not afford million-dollar “green” condominiums.

## Summer 2007



Once a week, we pulled an aluminum bicycle cart loaded with boxes of produce, bread, cheese, and other groceries through the neighborhood, distributing for free what we acquired by skimming off the top of consumer society. It was a way to meet neighbors, hear stories about the area, and initiate conversations about police, landlords, and the impending development, Greenbridge. I often conversed with an ex-Panther who had done time in Terre-Haute; other locals talked about rent prices or everyday work shit. Whenever we met a family with members in prison, we'd connect them with the anti-prison group that operated out of our garage so they could get books and other resources in to their relatives. One day, we learned that a household down the way that had taken groceries from us for months was getting evicted; two weeks later, we heard from guys painting the outside that the cops had contacted the landlord and asked him to replace the previous tenants with “college types.”

Other families brought similar stories of anger and frustration. Those face-to-face interactions later became the basis for efforts to fight the development. The groceries themselves were arbitrary; when they were perceived as charity, they may have even been an obstacle to connecting with people. The important thing was to open a direct avenue of communication with our neighbors that allowed us to bypass the representational and conservative politics of the existing institutions.

Years later, the church ran the only food distribution in the neighborhood. We had become too busy with other struggles to compete with their program, which received aboveboard the donations from grocery stores that we had previously obtained on the sly. They did good work, feeding hundreds of people, including many anarchists; but it's possible that if we had maintained another program, maybe focusing on something else, it could have served as the basis for a more collective and confrontational response to gentrification than anything the church would have countenanced.



Fall 2007



I attended a neighborhood association meeting soon after I moved into Northside. I hoped to learn more about the power dynamics of my new home.

And I did. In a historically black neighborhood with thousands of residents, largely working class and many living on pensions or social security, the only people at the meeting were four cops—two white and two black—one older black homeowner, and two paid black staff members of a local homeowners' organization, one of whom was a landlord who rented out multiple homes. The entire meeting was given over to these three black landowners pointing out households in the neighborhood that they believed were involved in crime. Fear of black youth was palpable from both black and white participants. I didn't utter a word, hoping to make my face forgettable for the four cops in the room.

The point of the meeting was for homeowners to serve as police informants. Years later, this homeowners' organization was accorded a respected role in negotiations with Greenbridge's developers, giving authority to the minority of neighbors who financially benefited from rising property costs.

The landlord behind the nonprofit saw herself as having good intentions. Her organization assisted black families in becoming homeowners in order to maintain an African-American presence in the area. She wanted the neighborhood to become prosperous; she was one of the first people to sound the alarm when the developers first bought the property to build Greenbridge. But from our perspective, the prosperity she wanted could only arrive at the expense of the poorer families of color, whose parents would lose their homes while their teenagers ended up in jail. In the end, neither the wealthy black neighborhood she hoped to foster nor the ethnically diverse working class enclave we wanted to protect were realistic outcomes; they only existed as strategic differences between those who opposed the development.

Winter 2008



I went to a neighborhood meeting advertising a discussion about the development. Out of maybe a dozen people, I was the only renter. Most of the others were white, and three were cops. Before the meeting, I had wondered why none of the advertisements were bilingual and there was no option for Spanish/English translation when in three of the households around mine, none of the adults were fluent in English.

There were two college activists observing, who expressed interest in organizing around

this issue. They seemed to be connected to the one outspoken middle-aged black woman at the meeting, who was the only other person there who lived on my street. She was the only person in the neighborhood I met who thought safety could come from more police on our block. I found out later that she supported the proposed condominiums because she was on staff of the homeowner's organization in the neighborhood that stood to benefit from the neighborhood gaining economic and social status; and at that time, the developers' promises of affordable housing units hadn't yet proved false. All the other homeowners at that meeting were opposed to the condominiums; they were living on fixed incomes and couldn't afford an increase in their property taxes.

Neighbors I spoke with elsewhere either opposed the development or hadn't heard of it at all. Many were already feeling the effects of gentrification—increased police violence, landlords evicting black families to rent to white college students, African and African-American business owners losing their buildings. The college activists who wanted to organize around gentrification did their "work in the community" at neighborhood meetings like the one I described and at a popular black church on the next block. Along with activists from other parts of town, the college kids kept telling me that there was no consensus from "the black community" about the development—especially because the minister of the church was initially in favor of it—so they couldn't organize against the proposed condominiums, they could only do education about it.

Spring 2008



They began leveling buildings, including the old hotel and a house on the property across the street from the planned condominiums. Anti-gentrification banners appeared on both of these—some of the first indications of the struggle that was to play out outside the formal neighborhood structures.

The developers held a groundbreaking ceremony in April. The same month, a pastor at the church gave a sermon identifying the development as a form of racism and calling on the congregation to do something about it. Meanwhile, students found a DVD promoting the new condominiums, in which interviews with locals were framed in such a way that they seemed to be promoting the development; the local media had done the same thing in interviews with at least one displaced business owner, editing out her anger and frustration. The students screened the DVD at the infoshop and on campus; some of the developers showed up to do spin control, and arguments ensued.



Then, seemingly out of nowhere, a small crowd raided the building contractor's office in a nearby city. A dozen or more masked individuals threw fliers in the air and carried furniture out of the office onto the lawn, chanting "We'll evict you first!" The contractor responded by calling whomever he thought might be connected to anarchists in the area and telling them that next time he would respond with armed force. This set the tone for the whole conflict, though it took several more months for the next round to begin.

Spring 2009

That April, lovely green posters appeared announcing that the development was cancelled. Citing a wide array of neighbors' concerns, they purported to represent a statement from the developers themselves. Identical handbills also appeared on every car and door in a five-block radius. The posters provided the contact information of the developers, who were forced to release an embarrassing public statement disavowing the cancellation.

Occurring shortly before construction began, this made the company appear vulnerable in the public eye while conveying that the opposition had a sense of humor and would not be limited to traditional political dialogue. Local media outlets, even the most liberal of which never came out against Greenbridge, nonetheless ate up the hoax, and Greenbridge's awkward disavowal of the apology forced them to place the development under new scrutiny.

Meanwhile, a coalition had formed to respond to the development. The steering committee included

religious leaders, a County Commissioner, the director of the neighborhood community center, and local business owners; students and professors from the nearby university were also involved. Some of us went to the meetings. We had a great deal of respect for some of the participants—chiefly the ones who, like us, were there because they actually lived in the neighborhood.

Two of us joined the coalition's action working group. Meeting in the church's second-floor conference room, we drafted a statement expressing explicit opposition to the development itself, from the position of both the church and Northside as a whole. The idea was to go door to door talking with neighbors and getting signatures in support of the statement, which would then be published in the local papers, undermining the developers' spin. The hope was that this narrative would legitimize the broad-based opposition to the development, providing a foundation from which a variety of groups could feel confident resisting the impending construction.

But when our group brought the statement to the larger coalition, it was blocked outright. Some participants seemed amazed we would even propose such a thing: they assumed the point of the coalition was to negotiate with the developers in order to obtain more affordable housing or free energy credits for Northside neighbors. Many had no hope that the project could be blocked with the lot already purchased and the permits secured. We argued that any concessions the developers offered would be beside the point as households were evicted or driven out by higher rents and property taxes. A professor who offered school credit to students who

**WHAT TO DO  
IN CASE OF GREEN-  
BRIDGE RESIDENT:  
Key their car.**



**"Whoa, dude, how did your car get all those scratches?"**

**WHAT TO DO  
IN CASE OF GREEN-  
BRIDGE RESIDENT:  
Scream epithets loudly.**



**"You rich, racist jerk! I can't afford my rent now and my neighbors got evicted. Why don't you move to Cary?"**

**WHAT TO DO  
IN CASE OF GREEN-  
BRIDGE RESIDENT:  
Panhandle aggressively.**



**"Hey yuppie! Give me five dollars! Just five dollars! I know you got the money!"**



participated in this extracurricular activity argued that we should “work with the developers” rather than against them. The pastor who had delivered the fiery sermon against Greenbridge remained silent.

This should not have taken us by surprise. We were on a different page than the people who controlled the coalition. Poor renters were underrepresented and had little influence, especially behind the scenes. Professors and other leaders took their roles as representatives and mediators for granted, imposing their political assumptions as the horizon of possibility. Local business owners could not risk alienating the developers; when gentrification was complete, Greenbridge residents would be their new customers. It seemed like a losing battle. Yet in refusing to take a concrete stand or develop tactics that could hit the developers where it hurt, the coalition gave up the opportunity to negotiate from a position of strength.

For a while, we were dispirited and didn’t do anything. Finally, in a mixture of despair and curiosity, we went door to door with the statement by ourselves, just to see what would happen. The results surprised us: practically everyone we spoke to was enthusiastic about the statement. The actual residents of the neighborhood had a very different attitude than their would-be representatives and supporters. We had made the classic mistake of conflating representation with reality.

In the end, over sixty households publicly signed the statement identifying future residents as racist and urging no one to buy condominiums. We bought space to print it in the local paper ourselves, and distributed hundreds of copies of it in poster form.

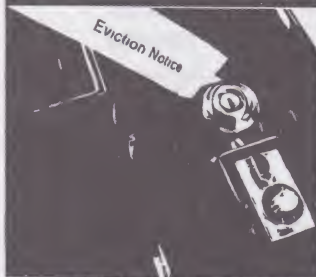
This incensed the developers, who had no recourse against our informal initiative.

Yet in accepting our role as the marginalized opposition, with no obvious way for people to get involved beyond signing the statement, we had ceded the ground of participatory action. From then on, though we were never limited by reformists’ hang-ups or the hindrances of institutional transparency, it was difficult to position ourselves so that others could join us, even though the majority of residents shared our opposition to the development. Without an autonomous neighborhood assembly or something of the like, withdrawing from the coalition was as much an acknowledgment of weakness as a principled stand or strategic decision. Two years later, with a wave of insurrections, occupations, and encampments sweeping the globe, this omission became obvious.

## Summer 2009

Another slow summer afternoon staffing the infoshop. I look up from my magazine to see an unfamiliar man walk into the store, eyeing the shelves only momentarily before striding up to the counter. He sports khaki shorts, a designer polo shirt, expensive sunglasses, and the falsely hearty, somewhat distracted demeanor of the rich and busy. I dislike him immediately, but this isn’t just a subcultural space, so I try to avoid judging solely by appearances. Perhaps he’s a wealthy liberal, here for his copy of *The Nation*? But then I hear, in a nasal northeastern accent, “I’m Michael Cucchiara. I’m one of the partners at Greenbridge.”

**TIM TOBEN  
DOESN'T  
CARE ABOUT  
YOUR RENT.**



Luxury housing is not affordable housing. Low-wage jobs are not equality. More cops on the block is not peace and harmony. Yuppies and gentrification are not inevitable.

**GREEDBRIDGE DOESN'T CARE  
ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT.**



A crane is not a tree. A high-rise building is not a greenspace. Luxury condos do not make a community. Zip cars, concrete, and the millionaire lifestyle are not ecologically sustainable.

ASST/ALC



Are you fucking serious? This guy is a multimillionaire investor in the project we've been fighting for the last three years. He knows this is hostile territory; he must have some reason for being here. I clomp on my best poker face as he launches into a rambling story about how development is going to become a positive force in the community, including a litany of ill-informed or blatantly racist remarks about the neighborhood his condos are gentrifying. He's droning on about the different businesses they're considering for the retail spaces underneath the condos, and how they want to find ones that will be "the right fit" for the development and the neighborhood... when suddenly I realize where he's going.

"And since your bookstore has strong roots in the progressive community here, and Greenbridge wants to work with our community partners to make connections with other local interests, we want to see if you'd be interested in moving into one of our retail spaces."

With a herculean effort, I maintain a straight face as he lays out his pitch: 1000 square feet of brand new space, tall ceilings, free rein to build in renovations, a 40-seat theater upstairs we can use for film screenings, flexible move-in terms, and to top it all an unimaginably cheap rent, probably half of the market value, with three years of rent control to ensure it stays affordable for us. It's a dream offer, the ultimate insider deal, unthinkable in the context of skyrocketing downtown prices. He must know that we're desperate to move out of our cramped, frequently flooding space, but can't secure any nearby retail space on our shoestring budget.

We can't afford to expand, to move, or to stay. It's a catch-22, and here's the perfect solution.

But what does Greenbridge get out of it? He's got some nice platitudes about how our missions are similar—social justice, concern for the environment—but he doesn't have to say the obvious truth: they're looking to buy off the opposition. They've already done it with the neighborhood churches; after meetings with the pastors and a token donation to the Boys and Girls Club, they got the leaders to sell out their congregations and divide the feisty resistance that neighbors had begun to mount. But the anarchist scene around this infoshop has been implacable. We've hosted multiple anti-Greenbridge discussions and organizing events, and we're known as a beacon of intransigent opposition to development. When a bomb threat had been called in halting construction, prompting panic among the developers, one of them had asked in desperation, "Can't we go talk to someone at that bookstore and get them to stop this?"

So what better way to neutralize an enemy and gain public legitimacy than by moving us in? And, in contrast to the alternative proposal of a 24-hour mini-mart, our disproportionately white project would attract what he referred to as the "right kind of people." The developers were willing to sacrifice substantial retail space profit to enlist us in the process of gentrification. In one fell swoop, they could shut us up, appear progressive, and obtain a tax write-off for offering below-market rent to a nonprofit organization. That's a lot of birds to kill with one stone.

I nod politely through our "conversation" as he yammers on about the supposed affinity between

**do you have \$1,000,000?**


yes! zip-car fleet  
yes! dry cleaning service  
private fitness center  
full-service concierge  
free parking garage  
24-hour security  
a self-righteous sense of entitlement  
white neighbors  
(and you get to be an "environmentalist!")

Let's get a few things straight:  
There is no such thing as a risk aversionist, and there is no such thing as green capitalism. Rich people make their money by seeing to it that their money is never lost, and by making money when the Earth faster than they can be removed. They're called capitalists, and it's about as green as your skin, and as white as a sheet.

The new Greenbridge condos on Oakton St. will have no truly affordable housing, with the average condo selling between \$350,000 and \$1,000,000, and will accelerate displacement and gentrification. The new Greenbridge condos on Oakton St. will have no truly affordable housing, with the average condo selling between \$350,000 and \$1,000,000, and will accelerate displacement and gentrification.

Greenbridge: it's like a tax write-off for your conscience!

**GREEDBRIDGE DOESN'T CARE ABOUT NORTH-SIDE RESIDENTS.**



**THEY ONLY CARE ABOUT ONE THING.**

**GREEN BRIDGE = TOTAL FAIL**

(PROOF THAT BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO BAD PEOPLE.)



his green capitalist development and our anarchist infoshop, culminating in an anecdote about his recent trip to Iceland, where he spent a weekend in a cabin with the CEO of Walmart—I swear, I couldn't make this up—at negotiations about green standards for consumer products. Isn't it exciting not just to be outraged, but to be part of the *solution*? I don't know how much longer I can keep a straight face. Finally, he leaves me his cell phone number so that once I'd checked with the collective I could call him to work out the details, proffers a clammy handshake and plastic smile, and strides out, not pretending to take any interest in the merchandise—among which anti-gentrification stickers and zines critiquing green capitalism feature prominently. Do rich people actually think that with enough money they can buy anything they want, even the loyalty of people that hate them and everything they stand for?

I had learned two important things. First, they were so uncertain of their position—and were having so much trouble leasing retail units—that it was worth it to them to take a loss to placate us. Second, it never pays to behave. We were only being offered that opportunity on account of our uncompromising hostility. If we'd played nice from the beginning, we would have had no leverage. Only naïve liberals think that you initiate negotiations by making concessions.

Yet even if we had wanted to cash in our white privilege and sell out our community, doing so would mean losing whatever leverage we had. There was only one path: open war.

Fall 2009 ★

Winter 2010 ❁

A tremendous crane hung over our neighborhood: the claw of doom. I passed under it every day as I left my house. I imagined climbing to the top of it, dropping a banner about gentrification, and locking myself to it. I imagined the shit-storm of controversy that would ensue as community leaders and millionaire investors tripped over each other to tell the media that I didn't represent the neighborhood. I tried to imagine where we would go when we couldn't afford to live in our house anymore. Later, when it was too late, I learned that others had fantasized about doing the same thing.

In January, vandals hit the building site; police reported that they spray-painted 14 concrete columns, 21 walls, five doors, and a forklift for a total of \$11,000 damage. The paint was cleaned up immediately and local media declined to report what it said, although one paper quoted a local who had seen "Greenbridge is racist" painted there the previous year. Rumor had it that the developers' offices down the street had also been attacked.

In February, someone called in a second bomb threat, interrupting construction again. A local puppet troupe reworked "Hansel and Gretel" as an allegory about the developers. The letters section of the local paper was full of debate. Defenders always insisted that gentrification had been going on in the neighborhood for decades already, as if Greenbridge wasn't exacerbating the process. Seriously, is it OK to kick someone just because he's down?

### AGAINST LANDLORDS... AGAINST DEVELOPERS... AGAINST COPS...

On June 18th several dozen people staged a protest against the infamous development Greenbridge, a luxury "eco" condo project charged with hastening the increase of rent costs in the surrounding areas. While some people remained outside waving banners and handing out information, others entered the building and according to various reports, moved furniture, mounted slogans, and spray-painted slogans. Three people were arrested and subsequently charged with felony riot. A portrayal of the mainstream media has been anxious to affirm. This was only the most recent event in a long series of visible opposition to this project, which has contributed to the momentum for a moratorium on development.

Greenbridge's supporters are quick to point out that gentrification was already under way before Greenbridge was built, as if somehow this means a luxury project designed for the suburban rich isn't part of the problem. Mayor Klausmeyer called this project "disgusting" and "a slap in the face" of the city's two-thirds empty when families are being evicted or displaced right down the street.

Others contend that Greenbridge was specifically targeted when the problem is systemic. Of course the development is part of a larger structural problem whereby our town is quickly becoming a place only college students and eco-snobos can afford to live—but this is all the more reason to target one of the most pervasive aspects of that structure.

This is not just about Greenbridge or Northside. This is about every instance where a landlord wields power over a tenant, where a developer can change the face of a neighborhood with the stroke of a pen, where a cop is targeted and harassed based on the color of their skin. All of these forces push us to live in insecurity and fear. June 18th was one small push in the opposite direction.

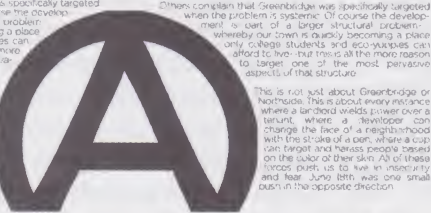
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Some of the poster and flier designs that became a familiar sight on the walls of downtown.



There was a deep cultural gulf between the mayor, the developers, and the “community leaders” who wielded legitimate political power on one side and the disillusioned, disenfranchised, and vulnerable on the other. No one thought Greenbridge could

depicting a view of the earth from space appeared over posters—as if we were doing battle with yuppie environmentalists in the cartoon version of our lives.

Summer 2010

Every day the building inched closer to completion. The local “independent” paper wrote their first piece on the development when it was about to open. The article framed Greenbridge as the future and black and low-income residents as the past; it claimed that the student-community coalition had been making headway until “Talks were derailed... after vandals sprayed graffiti on Greenbridge, called in a bomb threat and plastered a flyer around town falsely claiming the project was being halted.”

It was clear to me that actions like that were *working* to delegitimize the development, but I had a hard time explaining this to others. As a student and one of the only anarchists who remained involved in the coalition, I found myself struggling to translate the impact and intent of such actions without taking responsibility for them. Positioned as the public face of the struggle, the coalition caught the flak for them; Tim Toben’s lawyers had sent the coalition letters threatening prosecution for “multiple felonies,” and Toben asked the university to arrest the students he believed were involved. (Indeed, I was arrested soon thereafter, though for something apparently unrelated.) The response within the coalition made it clear how scared people were of the developers.

By summer 2010, I had finally left the coalition myself, unable to stomach the internal power dynamics and liberal politics. Meanwhile, the coalition was turning away from organizing against Greenbridge: with the buildings nearing completion, why continue to fight?

In some ways, everything had played out like a caricature. On one side, a well-organized official group had gathered large numbers to talk and talk, making paltry requests the developers had no reason to honor. On the other side, secretive individuals had succeeded in ruining the development’s reputation, but failed to turn those isolated actions into momentum that brought more people into the struggle.

In public, anarchists made very clear what we were unwilling to do—attend meetings, ask for concessions, accept Greenbridge—but it was harder for us to articulate what we were *willing* to do. Wanting to stop Greenbridge seemed to many people like wanting to prevent the tide from coming in. We needed to make it feel worth the effort—we needed to win something, or to be more fun, or have stronger relationships. Because so many of our actions had



Prevalent graffiti around town.

be stopped, let alone that stopping it would halt gentrification; but we knew what side we were on, and we weren’t going to go quietly.

In those days, you could walk around town and pick out “Burn Greenbridge” graffiti every few blocks. Posters appeared regularly on the walls decrying gentrification; there was a whole series urging action against anyone who bought one of the condominiums. Some posters were numbered—“#32 of 1000”—perhaps after the example of Abbie Hoffman, who reputedly released two pigs into a department store painted “#1” and “#3.”

We sighted men in khaki pants going around town blacking out anti-gentrification posters and graffiti with spray-paint. They weren’t city employees; presumably the developers hired them. Eventually, someone wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper reporting these sightings, accusing Greenbridge employees of vandalism. After that, the spray-painting ceased. Instead, enormous stickers



to be covert, we could neither defend them in the media or to other participants in the struggle, nor use them to position ourselves as real actors in the fight.

Nonetheless, there was a strange interplay between the coalition and the other individuals opposing the development. The size of the coalition and the reputation of some of its members brought the struggle into the public view in a way we might not have been able to accomplish on our own, while covert actions pushed the struggle further. Despite the tensions, these forces had worked in concert.

Yet when I moved away from Chapel Hill, out of my home on the block that now lay in the shadow of Greenbridge, I felt we had lost.

Fall 2010 ★

The building was completed that summer and people began to move in. We only saw them when they went out to walk their dogs; they mostly stayed inside their fortress. They even had a parking garage in the basement, so they could go directly in and out without any danger of running into us.

Many of the black renters we'd known were gone, but there were still a couple houses of predominantly white anarchists left. We had instinctively adopted a strategy of *trashing* that I'd seen in other embattled neighborhoods. The idea is that, paradoxically, the only way to protect your neighborhood from gentrification is to wreck it. You have to make it a place no one wealthier than yourself—no one who had any other option—would ever choose to live.

I've had friends who put in a lot of work into improving a space they were renting, only to be kicked out so the landlord could take advantage of their improvements. Likewise, I'd lived in houses where, for a time, we had a sort of renters' security on account of how messed up the house was, because

the landlords knew they couldn't find anyone else who would be willing to live in such conditions. In the precarity imposed by class warfare, blowing your security deposit on wrecking your own house starts to look more rational than spending that money on renovating someone else's property.

Some of this was just putting a brave face on the inevitable challenges of poverty: we had no means of moving that broken, rusty, flat-tired van out of our driveway anyway, so why not toss a moldy mattress on its roof? This might not have gone over so well if our neighbors hadn't already liked us. In any case, from the gentrifiers' perspective, being an all-white household surely canceled out the effects of our untidiness.

The real problem with this approach is that it applies symptomatic treatment to a systemic problem. Gentrifiers seek out neighborhoods in which property values have dropped low enough that new investments can turn a quick profit. Landlords sometimes use arson to clear out tenants and open the way for more profitable development; this doesn't mean that arson can't be turned against the subsequent developments, but it indicates that no amount of damage we could do to our own neighborhoods could suffice to keep us secure once developers' eyes are trained on them.

The property managers brought potential buyers into my neighbor's house. He kept trying to interrupt to emphasize what poor shape the place was in. "See this?" he would point out mournfully, pointing to the warped floorboards or broken piping. "Bad craftsmanship." The potential buyers just looked right through him. They weren't interested in the current condition of the house, but the future market potential of the property.

That moldy mattress finally turned up on the sidewalk in front of Greenbridge. To our surprise,

It never pays to behave. The developers were only trying to parley with us on account of our uncompromising hostility. If we'd played nice from the beginning, we would have had no leverage. Only naïve liberals think that you initiate negotiations by making concessions.





*Someone killed the trees planted along the sidewalk around Greenbridge one by one, presumably by dosing them repeatedly with salt water.*

it remained there for several days; they didn't seem to have their act together. Maybe the recession had disoriented them. In a fulfillment of broken window theory, we shifted to trashing *their* block rather than ours.

Rumors of a competition spread around town: who could leave the most extreme garbage in front of their property? Every time any of us walked past Greenbridge, we would pull the trash bags out of the garbage cans in front of it and empty them onto the sidewalk.

The place started to look downwardly mobile—with compost, empty pizza boxes, and the occasional broken bottle contrasting with its fancy façade. I heard a rumor that someone used wheat-paste to produce the impression that used condoms had been slung across its windows. Someone else apparently hauled the eviscerated carcass of a road-killed deer up to the doorstep, leaving a trail of blood leading back into the neighborhood that the developers still insisted welcomed them. All this while the developers were scrambling to find buyers for ten stories of condominiums and the economy was plunged in recession.

## Winter 2011

Despite the recession, all around us, young white professionals and college kids were moving into the neighborhood. Our dear neighbors were evicted from their home with little warning. The head of their household was the heart of the neighborhood, with an open door and delicious food to share; she offered refuge for many of young people in the neighborhood and knew how to keep them out of trouble. The landlord's excuse was that the house needed to be repaired, and that the family would be welcome to apply to rent it afterwards, just like anyone else.

They had to move away to another city. The youngest son was forced to switch schools just after being accepted onto his high school football team.

The landlord did a month of negligible repairs on the house and put it on the market. Someone repeatedly stole the "for sale" sign out of the yard until the landlord had to keep it in the window. Finally, the house was rented out at something like double the old rent. The nice white couple that moved in



reported to us that the landlord had told them that the previous tenants had died.

Spring 2011 ★

In March, we read in the paper that, contrary to earlier reports, Greenbridge had filled fewer than half of its units; the developers owed the bank \$28.7 million. For the first time, the possibility of foreclosure loomed. It seemed crazy: foreclosure was what happened to people like us, not to multi-million-dollar investors. The recession had turned the world upside down.

Someone was killing the trees planted along the sidewalk in front of Greenbridge, presumably dosing them repeatedly with salt water. Their dead branches looked positively funereal in front of the empty shop fronts on the ground floor. "Get out" was painted in glass etching solution on the window of the sole occupied shop front, an art boutique clearly not intended to serve the neighborhood. Determined to maintain market-friendly positive vibes, the shop-owners attempted to adjust the graffiti to read, "Get art."

In April, Bank of America initiated foreclosure proceedings against Greenbridge. A deadline was set for June for them to find new investors to keep the project afloat. Meanwhile, the displacements continued; my favorite neighbors had been forced to move to Durham, along with several other friends of mine, and the household of anarchists across the street from us had just received notice that they would have to clear out—"for repairs," as the property owner explained. We were certain our house was next, and we had nowhere to go.

This was the climate in which anarchists finally began to discuss organizing a public demonstration against Greenbridge. The idea was to discourage investors from rescuing the project, and also—if the development did go bankrupt—to emphasize that this had been the result of popular opposition, not just the recession. The drawbacks of the purely clandestine approach had become obvious. Now that the coalition had shifted its focus, the only coordinates left on the terrain were the good citizens who publicly supported the development, the silent majority that privately disapproved of it, and secretive criminal resistance. Yet this isolation was self-perpetuating; the demonstration was promoted only by word of mouth.

On June 18, a week before the deadline that had been set for foreclosure, a crowd arrived at the gates of Greenbridge. A dozen people remained outside holding banners: "Honk If You Can't Pay Your Rent," "Greenbridge is Closed," "Total War

on Gentrification." Dozens more entered the lobby, chanting and making considerable noise, most of them wearing masks. Two without masks delivered coffee and a muffin to the employee behind the desk, informing him that he was not in danger. Others made barricades out of the chic furniture. The atmosphere was charged: several years of bottled tension were finally exploding into the open, and the results exceeded everyone's expectations.

When the police arrived, the group withdrew through a side door. Three people were arrested as the rest escaped. The demonstration in front of



Stencil emphasizing the combative spirit of anarchists in Chapel Hill, the so-called Paris of the Piedmont.

the building continued as the image of Greenbridge surrounded by police was inscribed on the public consciousness.

I was one of the arrestees. The police took us to the police station for processing, then to the county jail. We were charged with felony riot and a couple counts of property destruction. They put me in a cell with white supremacists who told me they were waiting to go to trial for homicide. *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* came on the TV; we were dressed in orange jumpsuits, watching prisoners dressed in orange jumpsuits on television. America.



The next day, the sun rose to reveal fresh graffiti on the development. Posters blanketed the walls proclaiming “Greenbridge: Total Fail.” Police circled the neighborhood. The whole town was tense. Whether you were a developer or a protester, anything associated with Greenbridge felt toxic.

A local liberal blog, the first news source to report on the incident, alleged all sorts of nonsense—including

This heavy-handed response completed the process of permanently associating Greenbridge with calamity, public outcry, and misfortune. In bringing all their leverage to bear on demonizing the protesters, the developers secured the cement blocks of disaster around their feet. They were sunk.

On July 2, the same network staged another demonstration at the development. This one was widely promoted, but the aftermath of the previous protest had been so intimidating that there were practically no new faces besides a large contingent of police and a few fake counter-protesters to give quips to the media. Nevertheless, this demonstration served to counter the narrative that the opposition to Greenbridge was just a few secretive criminals who could be cowed into silence by a crackdown.

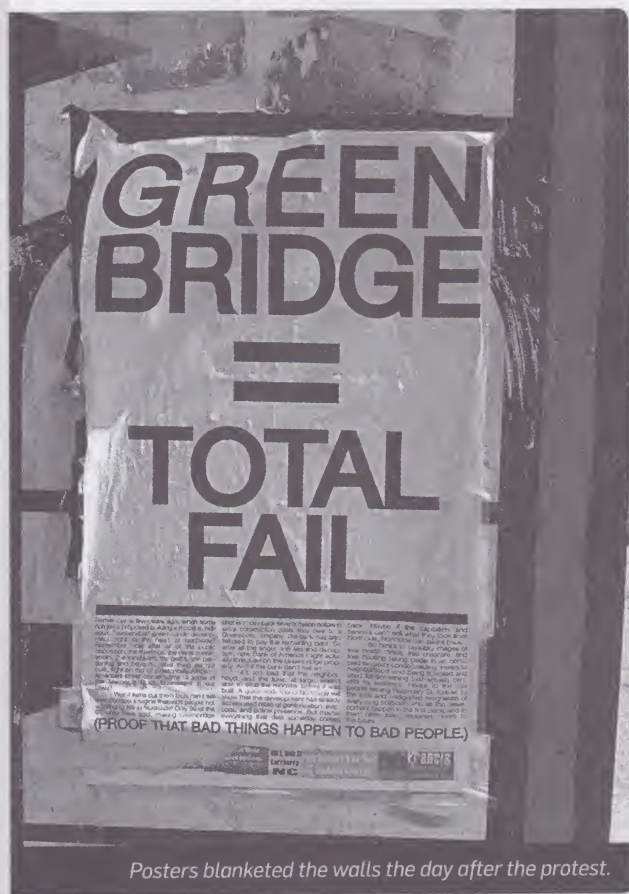
Although open protest had been effectively marginalized, there was more neighborhood support than many of us feared in the paranoid days immediately following the arrests. Many residents understood why people would go in and “tear up” the development. An African-American family living immediately across the street from Greenbridge expressed in conversation that they would be happy to see someone blow it up, so long as the wreckage didn’t fall on them.

I spoke with my public defender about my case. Since I had not been masked, and had done nothing more than reassure the concierge (“I’m not in danger,” he had reported on the 911 recording; “they’re being very polite to me”), could they make the charges of vandalism and riot stick? She explained to me that, per North Carolina law, any participant in a demonstration can be found guilty of damages committed by any other participant. In moving furniture, other protesters had apparently scuffed the floor and broken a vase; Greenbridge had assessed the costs at \$3400, well over the minimum to qualify as a felony. You could run around our house with a baseball bat for ten minutes without doing enough damage to make it a felony.

The foreclosure sale, set for September 15, was delayed to November 7. The bank didn’t want to be responsible for the property, either. It was a liability for everyone.

Fail 2011 ★

In October, a group of out-of-town investors bought Greenbridge from the bank. The mayor had been scrambling all summer to arrange a solution. With two thirds of the units empty, a lien on the property blocked further sales; only the cheapest units in the building had sold out. Tim Toben appeared in the papers acknowledging that he and his partners



Posters blanketed the walls the day after the protest.

ing, hilariously, that the participants “were armed with an anvil.” Imagine us lugging an anvil into the lobby—with which to do what, precisely? As best as anyone could make it out, the blogger, who was not present, must have misheard the word “handbill.” The corporate media followed suit, plastering our faces on the front page with the words “vandalism” and “riot” in every article; further articles appeared throughout the week, in which the developers’ perspective was reprinted verbatim (with one of them falsely asserting that protesters had broken windows) and the mayor promised to inflict the worst possible consequences. After the papers printed my address, vigilantes from the development showed up looking for me there and at the local radical bookstore. They didn’t find me, but they made threats to anyone who would listen. Like I said, it was tense.



had lost everything. The building contractors lost \$6 million, too.

The official narrative was that Greenbridge failed on account of the recession, but everyone knows there was more to it. The climate of opposition punctuated by protest and vandalism rendered everything associated with the development toxic. No one who could afford to buy an expensive condominium wanted to live in such a controversial space.

The student coalition had already moved on to other things. A group of them came by my house one day. The oldest one explained that they were campaigning for an ordinance that would penalize renters for having too many vehicles parked on their property. This was their idea of helping out in the neighborhood.

I walked him a few feet down the street. "Look," I said, pointing at the house my Mexican neighbors rented next door, out of which they ran their painting business. "How many vehicles do you see parked there?"

"Six... seven," he admitted, waving the younger volunteers on so they wouldn't hear our conversation.

"And who do you think that ordinance is going to be used against if you get it passed? Just white students?"

He mumbled something about how it wasn't perfect, but it was important to help locals with their initiatives. Motherfucker didn't even live in our neighborhood.

Winter 2012 ★

Greenbridge sat dark and empty at the end of our block, a hulking monument to hubris and failure, something out of Shelley's "Ozymandias." The dead trees planted in front of it had been cut down, leaving only stumps.

I was the last of our original household left. The other household of anarchists had been pushed out "for repairs," like the black renters I had known, their houses all reopened without significant changes but drastically more expensive. The only survivors of the neighborhood that preceded our arrival were black homeowners like my neighbor, who was over ninety and wouldn't be there much longer; the neighborhood only looked like its old self when all the former residents returned to the church for funerals.

Our long war with Tim Toben ended with a surreal twist. On December 1, the bankrupted millionaire ran an editorial in the local paper entitled "Time to Take Direct Action." After the failure of his green development scheme, he had read Derrick Jensen's book *Deep Green Resistance* and changed his tune:

I agree with Jensen that all options must be on the table. The mainstream environmental movement has failed to slow the industrial juggernaut that puts our planet and the children of all species in peril... It is time for direct action of every type, and it's encouraging to see more and creative uses

Greenbridge sat dark and empty at the end of our block, a hulking monument to hubris and failure, something out of Shelley's "Ozymandias." The dead trees planted in front of it had been cut down, leaving only stumps.



of civil disobedience. We are in financial, social and ecological crisis, and I'm grateful to all who are willing to take risks of every sort to fundamentally alter America's direction.

Anarchists read this in disbelief, some still dealing with the legal repercussions of engaging in direct action against the gentrification of Northside, for which Toben remained unapologetic. But it was no fluke: a year and a half later, in a newspaper interview beginning with the words, "Tim Toben says the anarchists had a point," he argued that anarchists were right to assert that there was no capitalist solution for ecological crisis.

What are we to conclude from this? One way to understand Toben's conversion is that it was the effect of being drawn into dialogue, albeit a dialogue of pure force. He who does battle with monsters should take care lest he become a monster, as Nietzsche put it. Something similar arguably happened to the liberal journalist Chris Hedges, whose vituperative attacks on "black bloc anarchists" in the waning days of the Occupy movement occasioned a great deal of outrage; a year later, he was approvingly publishing quotations from Alexander Berkman, the anarchist revolutionary who tried to kill industrialist Henry Clay Frick. Neither Toben nor Hedges are comrades, but in shifting their positions they contribute to shifting the public discourse, which changes the social terrain on which we engage. If social conflict intensifies on a large scale, we can expect more of these ambiguous defections from the enemy camp.

Perhaps the lesson is that we can change the hearts and minds of our enemies, but *only if we beat them*. Had Toben's development succeeded, he would never have had any incentive to reconsider his politics.

## Summer 2012 ★

My last week on the block, as I was lugging things out into the U-Haul, people from the neighborhood kept coming by to tell me how much they would miss having me around. That felt good. We'd made a lot of enemies during our years there, but only in high places.

After the rental agency forced us out of our house, they cut down the last trees on the property. They cut another driveway into the front yard so the soil where our passionflowers had grown was replaced by cement. They tore down the blackberry bushes that had grown from the garden bed to fill our blender with fruit every summer. They tore down the garage in back, where we had mailed books to prisoners for half a decade, leaving only a stark concrete platform. I went by to see it once and could hardly bear to look.

The condominiums at the top of the street were still empty, along with the shop fronts at street level, and the empty lot the developers had purchased on the other side of the street. Neither the "community plaza" the developers had promised nor the "education center" preserving Northside's history ever materialized. Everyone had lost—the developers, the building contractors, the protesters, the renters, the original fixed-income homeowners. As bad as it was, it was a better outcome than I'd seen in other anti-gentrification struggles around the country. Usually capitalists can steamroll over a neighborhood with no consequences at all. It's not easy fighting against the economy itself.

Over the next two years, several more gigantic mixed-use buildings were completed downtown, with a lot less resistance. The last affordable apartment complexes in the area were sold to companies

Everyone had lost—the developers, the building contractors, the protesters, the renters, the original fixed-income homeowners. As bad as it was, it was a better outcome than I'd seen in other anti-gentrification struggles. It's not easy fighting against the economy itself.



that jacked up the prices to force out the poor. There were a couple well-attended protest marches, and fake advertisements appeared promoting the new owners in terms that made their racism explicit, but nothing comparable to the furor around the construction of Greenbridge. In bankrupting that development, we'd won an unlikely victory, but we hadn't laid a sufficient foundation for a broader struggle against gentrification.

## Afterwards

Years later, my old housemates and I argued about how to represent the story of the struggle for Northside.

"I worry that people will read the account as presenting a binary choice between 'let them lead' and 'go rogue.'"

"I'm not trying to promote 'going rogue,' exactly, though I think it's important for us to act from our real beliefs and conditions. If you want to support the initiatives of those with less leverage, don't start with 'community leaders,' start with those who are most overlooked."

"That reminds me—I wish you'd talked about the listening projects. When you ask people to consider their histories anew, they become people with stories, people whose stories matter, which can actually promote activity for people disenfranchised from history. Asking each other where we came from can help reveal where we might want to go together. You hinted that it can be a way of burying the past struggles, but it could also be a way of staking claim to a place."

"If we could do everything over again, my dearest wish would be to start some kind of assembly with other disenfranchised renters, like A---'s family across the street. Even though we were separated by race, they were the ones I felt closest to. I doubt it could have been something formal—I imagine they were used to being marginalized by every formal process, including the ones in the neighborhood."

"I agree, but you have to admit that if we had gotten an assembly of poor renters going, it would have caused some serious blowback. Some of those renters were in houses owned by black families from Northside who had a totally different take on Greenbridge and everything else. Like, one of the ways I played my position on that block was by

representing the problems A---'s family faced to L---'s family in the best light, since there were connections between L---'s family and the folks who owned the house A---'s family rented. When the pigs were all up in A---'s driveway, I had to go explain that it was because someone had a taillight out. That was me being a 'white ally.' L---'s daughters trusted me more than A---'s family—isn't that some shit! My point is that if we'd been rolling with the other renters, you can be sure that not just the developers and the police but also the local homeowners would have pulled out all the stops to divide and criminalize us."

"And it could have gone really badly for our neighbors if they were associated with some of the things we did."

"Yeah. There were all sorts of obstacles."

"But when y'all went door to door with that statement against the development, everyone signed it. I think there was a window when we could have done our own public organizing even if we didn't want to work with the other organizations."

"I wonder if we had been in dialogue with people who didn't share our politics, what if we felt so responsible to them that some of the spikier things wouldn't have happened? What if we were able to do our part to drive Greenbridge into bankruptcy because we weren't working with other people?"

"But our goal wasn't just to stop one development! Remember how they always repeated that gentrification had been going on for decades, and it wasn't just about Greenbridge? That should have been *our* line! They shouldn't have been able to use that against us."

"That's classic. When we focus on the symptom, they point to the cause. When we focus on the cause, they point to the symptoms!"

"We shouldn't have limited it to one target. We should have had a longer-term strategy based on our analysis. This is the situation you always talk about, where we win something unexpectedly without any larger game plan."

"What would the alternative be? To take on the whole rental market?"

"What if we had? What would that have looked like? We can fantasize about a rent strike or whatever, but seriously, what would the intermediate steps have been? We could have advertised an autonomous neighborhood assembly, like you say—no cops, politicians, developers, or landlords allowed. The worst that could have happened would have been a meeting of a few local radicals; trying wouldn't have cost us anything. You're right that it would have been controversial—but getting those conflicts out in the open is just as important as taking on the developers."



# Deserting the Digital Utopia

## COMPUTERS AGAINST COMPUTING

The ideal capitalist product would derive its value from the ceaseless unpaid labor of the entire human race. We would be dispensable; it would be indispensable. It would integrate all human activity into a single unified terrain, accessible only via additional corporate products, in which sweatshop and marketplace merged. It would accomplish all this under the banner of autonomy and decentralization, perhaps even of "direct democracy."

Surely, were such a product invented, some well-meaning anti-capitalists would proclaim that the kingdom of heaven was nigh—it only remained to subtract capitalism from the equation. The anthem of the lotus-eaters.

It would not be the first time dissidents have extrapolated their utopia from the infrastructure of the ruling order. Remember the enthusiasm Karl Marx and Ayn Rand shared for railroads! By contrast, we believe that the technology produced by capitalist competition tends to incarnate and impose its logic; if we wish to escape this order, we should never take its tools for granted. *When we use tools, they use us back.*

Here follows our attempt to identify the ideology built into digital technology and to frame some hypotheses about how to engage with it.

### THE NET CLOSES

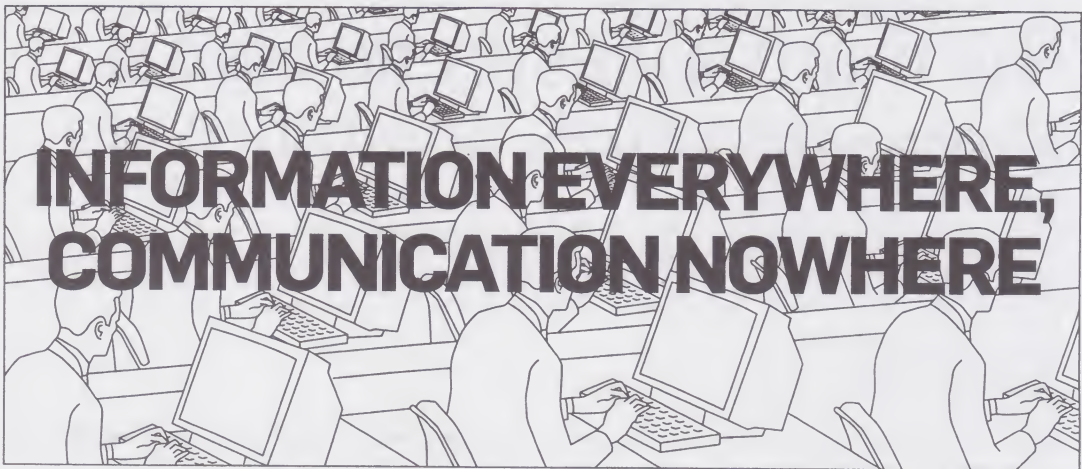
In our age, domination is not just imposed by commands issued from rulers to ruled, but by algorithms that systematically produce and constantly recalibrate power differentials. The algorithm is the fundamental mechanism perpetuating today's hierarchies; it determines the possibilities in advance, while offering an illusion of freedom as *choice*.

The digital reduces the infinite possibilities of life to a lattice of interconnecting algorithms—to choices between zeros and ones. The world is whittled down to representation, and representation expands to fill the world; the irreducible disappears. That which *does not compute* does not exist. The digital can present a breathtaking array of choices—of possible combinations of ones and zeros—but the terms of each choice are set in advance.

A computer is a machine that performs algorithms. The term originally designated a human being who followed orders as rigidly as a machine. Alan Turing, the patriarch of computer science, named the digital computer as a metaphorical extension of the most impersonal form of human labor: "The idea behind digital computers may be explained by saying that these machines are intended to carry

**"There is an invisible world connected at the handle to every tool—use the tool as it is intended, and it fits you to the mold of all who do the same; disconnect the tool from that world, and you can set out to chart others."**  
— Hunter/Gatherer





out any operations which could be done by a human computer." In the fifty years since, we have seen this metaphor inverted and inverted again, as human and machine become increasingly indivisible. "The human computer is supposed to be following fixed rules," Turing continued; "he has no authority to deviate from them in any detail."

Just as timesaving technologies have only made us busier, giving the busywork of number crunching to computers has not freed us from busywork—it has made computing integral to every facet of our lives. In post-Soviet Russia, numbers crunch you.

Since the beginning, the object of digital development has been the convergence of human potential and algorithmic control. There are places where this project is already complete. The iPhone "Retina display" is so dense that an unaided human eye cannot tell it is comprised of pixels. There are still gaps between the screens, but they grow smaller by the day.

The Net that closes the space between us closes the spaces within us. It encloses commons that previously resisted commodification, commons such as *social networks* that we can only recognize as such now that they are being mapped for enclosure. As it grows to encompass our whole lives, we have to become small enough to fit into its equations. Total immersion.

## THE DIGITAL DIVIDES

"We were once told that the airplane had 'abolished frontiers'; actually, it is only since the airplane became a serious weapon that frontiers have become definitely impassable."

—George Orwell, "You and the Atomic Bomb"

Well-intentioned liberals are concerned that there are entire communities not yet integrated into the global digital network. Hence free laptops for the

"developing world," hundred-dollar tablets for schoolchildren. They can only imagine the *one* of digital access or the *zero* of digital exclusion. Given this binary, digital access is preferable—but the binary itself is a product of the process that produces exclusion.

The project of computerizing the masses recapitulates and extends the unification of humanity under capitalism. No project of integration has ever extended as widely or penetrated as deeply as capitalism, and the digital will soon fill its entire space. "The poor don't have our products yet!"—that's the rallying cry of Henry Ford. Amazon.com sells tablets below cost, too, but they acknowledge it as a business investment. Individual workers depreciate without digital access; but being available at a single click, compelled to compete intercontinentally in real time, will not make the total market value of the working class *appreciate*. Capitalist globalization has already shown this. More mobility for individuals does not ensure more parity across the board.

To *integrate* is not necessarily to *equalize*: the leash, the rein, and the whip are also connective. Even where it connects, the digital divides.

Like capitalism, the digital divides haves from have-nots. But a computer is not what the has-not lacks. The has-not lacks *power*, which is not apportioned equally by digitization. Rather than a binary of capitalists and proletarians, a universal market is emerging in which each person will be ceaselessly evaluated and ranked. Digital technology can impose power differentials more thoroughly and efficiently than any caste system in history.

Already, your ability to engage in social and economic relations of all kinds is determined by the quality of your processor. At the lower end of the economic spectrum, the unemployed person with the smartphone snaps up the cheaper ride on Craigslist



# The more widespread digital access becomes, the more we can expect to see social and economic polarization accelerate.

(where hitchhiking used to be equal opportunity). At the upper end, the high-frequency trader profits directly on the processing power of his computers (making old-fashioned stockbroking look fair by comparison), as does the Bitcoin miner.

It is unthinkable that digital equality could be built on such an uneven terrain. The gap between rich and poor has not closed in the nations at the forefront of digitization. The more widespread digital access becomes, the more we will see social and economic polarization accelerate. Capitalism produces and circulates new innovations faster than any previous system, but alongside them it produces ever-increasing disparities: where equestrians once ruled over pedestrians, stealth bombers now sail over motorists.\* And the problem is not just that capitalism is an *unfair* competition, but that it imposes this competition on every sphere of life. Digitization makes it possible to incorporate the most intimate aspects of our relations into its logic.

The digital divide doesn't just run between individuals and demographics; it runs *through* each of us. In an era of precarity, when everyone simultaneously occupies multiple shifting social and economic positions, digital technologies selectively empower us according to the ways we are privileged while concealing the ways we are marginalized. The grad student who owes fifty thousand dollars communicates with other debtors through social media, but they are more likely to share their résumés or rate restaurants than to organize a debt strike.

Only when we understand the protagonists of our society as networks rather than freestanding individuals can the gravity of this hit home: digital collectivity is premised on market success, whereas we all experience failure in isolation. In the social networks of the future—which advertisers, credit agencies, employers, landlords, and police will monitor in a single matrix of control—we may

\* You can use a 3D printer to make a gun, but the NSA can make computer worms that seize control of entire industrial systems.

only encounter each other insofar as we affirm the market and our value on it.

## THE SYSTEM UPDATES

Competition and market expansion have always stabilized capitalism by offering new social mobility, giving the poor a stake in the game just when they had no more reason to play along. But now that the entire world is integrated into a single market and capital is concentrating in the hands of a shrinking elite, what could forestall a new wave of revolt?

The aforementioned Henry Ford was one of the innovators who responded to the last major crisis that threatened capitalism. Raising salaries and increasing mass-production and credit, he expanded the market for his products—undercutting the revolutionary demands of the labor movement by turning producers into consumers. This encouraged even the most precarious workers to aspire to inclusion rather than revolution.

The following generation's struggles erupted on a new terrain, as consumers reprised producers' demand for self-determination in the marketplace: first as a demand for individuality, and then, when that was granted, for autonomy. This culminated with the classic imperative of the do-it-yourself counterculture—"Become the media"—just as the global telecommunications infrastructure was miniaturized to make individual workers as flexible as national economies.

We have become the media, and our demand for autonomy has been granted—but this has not rendered us free. Just as the struggles of producers were defused by turning them into consumers, the demands of consumers have been defused by turning them into producers: where the old media had been top-down and unidirectional, the new media derive their value from user-created content. Meanwhile, globalization and automation eroded the compromise Ford had brokered between capitalists and a



privileged subset of the working class, producing a redundant and precarious population.

In this volatile context, new corporations like Google are updating the Fordist compromise via free labor and free distribution. Ford offered workers greater participation in capitalism via mass consumption; Google gives everything away for free by making everything into an unpaid job. In offering credit, Ford enabled workers to become consumers by selling their future as well as present labor; Google has dissolved the distinction between production, consumption, and surveillance, making it possible to capitalize on those who may never have anything to spend at all.

Attention itself is supplementing financial capital as the determinant currency in our society. It is a new consolation prize for which the precarious may compete—those who will never be millionaires can still dream of a million youtube views—and a new incentive to drive the constant innovation capitalism necessitates. As in the financial market, corporations and individuals alike may try their luck, but those who control the structures through which attention circulates wield the greatest power. Google's ascendancy does not derive from advertising revenue or product sales but from the ways it shapes the flows of information.

Looking ahead down this road, we can imagine a digital feudalism in which finance capital and attention have both been consolidated in the hands of an elite, and a benevolent dictatorship of computers (human and otherwise) maintains the Internet as a playpen for a superfluous population. Individual programs and programmers will be replaceable—the more internal mobility a hierarchical structure offers, the more robust and resilient it is—but the structure itself will be nonnegotiable. We can even imagine the rest of the population participating on an apparently horizontal and voluntary basis in refining the programming—within certain parameters, of course, as in all algorithms.

Digital feudalism could arrive under the banner of direct democracy, proclaiming that everyone has the right to citizenship and participation, presenting itself as a solution to the excesses of capitalism. Those who dream of a guaranteed basic income, or who wish to be compensated for the online harvesting of their “personal data,” must understand that these demands would only be realized by an all-seeing surveillance state—and that such demands legitimize state power and surveillance even if they are never granted. Statists will use the rhetoric of digital citizenship to justify mapping everyone in new cartographies of control, fixing each of us to a single online identity in order to fulfill their vision of a society subject to

total regulation and enforcement. “Smart cities” will impose algorithmic order on the offline world, replacing the unsustainable growth imperative of contemporary capitalism with new imperatives: surveillance, resilience, and management.<sup>†</sup>

In this dystopian projection, the digital project of reducing the world to representation converges with the program of electoral democracy, in which only representatives acting through the prescribed channels may exercise power. Both set themselves against all that is incomputable and irreducible, fitting humanity to a Procrustean bed. Fused as electronic democracy, they would present the opportunity to vote on a vast array of minutiae, while rendering the infrastructure itself unquestionable—the more participatory a system is, the more “legitimate.” Yet every notion of citizenship implies an excluded party; every notion of political legitimacy implies a zone of illegitimacy.

Genuine freedom means being able to determine our lives and relations from the ground up. We must be able to define our own conceptual frameworks, to formulate the questions as well as the answers. This is not the same as obtaining better representation or more participation in the prevailing order. Championing digital inclusivity and “democratic” state stewardship equips those who hold power to legitimize the structures through which they wield it.

It is a mistake to think that the tools built to rule us would serve us if only we could depose our masters. That's the same mistake every previous revolution has made about police, courts, and prisons. The tools of liberation must be forged in the struggle to achieve it.

## THE SOCIAL NETWORKS

We contemplate a future in which digital systems will meet our every need, as long as we ask only for the present order *delivered instantly*. Tracing the trajectory of our digital imaginary, we will soon be always voting, always working, always shopping, always in jail. Even fantasies that separate the soul from the body to travel inside the computer leave the liberal subject intact: every post-humanism we have been offered has been a neoliberalism, every one.

Liberal gradualists fighting for online privacy and net neutrality figure the subalterns they are defending as *individuals*. But as long as we operate according to the paradigm of “human rights,”

<sup>†</sup> Smart cities will not be based on greener buildings, but on the surveillance and control of our personal possessions: Walmart is already using RFID chips, the same chips used in US passports, to track the flows of its commodities across the globe.



# Google

## digital feudalism®

our attempts to organize against systems of digital control will only reproduce their logic. The regime of constitutions and charters that is presently coming to an end didn't just protect the liberal subject, the individual—it invented it. Each of the rights of the liberal subject implies a lattice of institutional violence to ensure its functional atomization—the partitioning of private property, the privacy of voting booths and prison cells.

If nothing else, the ostentatious networking of daily life underscores the fragility of liberal individuality. Where does “I” begin and end, when my knowledge is derived from search engines and my thoughts are triggered and directed by online updates? Countering this, we are encouraged to shore up our fragile individualism by constructing and disseminating autobiographical propaganda. The online profile is a reactionary form that attempts to preserve the last flickering ember of the liberal subjectivity by selling it. Say, “identity economy.”

But the object of exploitation is a network, and so is the subject in revolt. Neither have ever resembled the liberal individual for very long. The slave galley and the slave uprising are both networks composed of some aspects of many people. Their difference consists not in different types of people, but different principles of networking. Every body contains multiple hearts. The perspective that digital representation provides on our own activity enables us to clarify that we are pursuing a conflict between rival organizational principles, not between specific networks or individuals.

The networks produced and concealed by liberalism are inevitably hierarchical. Liberalism seeks to stabilize the pyramid of inequality by forever widening its base. Our desire is to level pyramids, to abolish the indignities of domination and submission. We do not demand that the rich give to the poor; we

seek to cut down the fences. We cannot say that the digital is *essentially* hierarchical, because we know nothing of “essences”; we only know that the digital is *fundamentally* hierarchical, in that it is built upon the same foundation as liberalism. If a different digital is possible, it will only emerge on a different foundation.

We don't need better iterations of existing technology; we need a better premise for our relations. New technologies are useless except insofar as they help us to establish and defend new relations.

Social networks preexist the internet; different social practices network us according to different logics. Understanding our relations in terms of circulation rather than static identity—in terms of trajectories rather than locations, of forces rather than objects—we can set aside the question of individual rights and set out to create new collectivities outside the logic that produced the digital and its divides.

## THE FORCE QUITTS

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Integration creates new exclusions; the atomized seek each other. Every new form of control creates another site of rebellion. Policing and security infrastructure have increased exponentially over the past two decades, but this has not produced a more pacified world—on the contrary, the greater the coercion, the more instability and unrest. The project of controlling populations by digitizing their interactions and environments is itself a coping strategy to forestall the upheavals that are bound to follow the economic polarization, social degradation, and ecological devastation wrought by capitalism.

The wave of uprisings that has swept the globe since 2010—from Tunisia and Egypt through Spain and Greece to the worldwide Occupy movement, and



most recently Turkey and Brazil—has largely been understood as a product of the new digital networks. Yet it is also a reaction against digitization and the disparities it reinforces. News of Occupy encampments spread via the Internet, but those who populated them were there because they were unsatisfied with the merely virtual—or because, being poor or homeless, they had no access to it at all. Before 2011, who could have imagined that the Internet would produce a worldwide movement premised on permanent presence in shared physical space?

This is only a foretaste of the backlash that will ensue as more and more of life is fitted to the digital grid. The results are not foreordained, but we can be sure there will be new opportunities for people to come together outside and against the logic of capitalism and state control. As we witness the emergence of digital citizenship and the identity market, let us begin by asking what technologies the digitally excluded non-citizen will need. The tools employed during the fight for Gezi Park in Istanbul in summer 2013 could present a humble starting place. How can we extrapolate from protest mapping to the tools that will be necessary for insurrection and survival, especially where the two become one and the same? Looking to Egypt, we can see the need for tools that could coordinate the sharing of food—or disable the military.

Understanding the expansion of the digital as an enclosure of our potential doesn't mean ceasing to

use digital technology. Rather, it means changing the logic with which we approach it. Any positive vision of a digital future will be appropriated to perpetuate and abet the ruling order; the reason to engage on the terrain of the digital is to destabilize the disparities it imposes. Instead of establishing digital projects intended to prefigure the world we wish to see, we can pursue digital practices that disrupt control. Rather than setting out to defend the rights of a new digital class—or to incorporate everyone into such a class via universal citizenship—we can follow the example of the disenfranchised, beginning from contemporary uprisings that radically redistribute power.

Understood as a class, programmers occupy the same position today that the bourgeoisie did in 1848, wielding social and economic power disproportionate to their political leverage. In the revolutions of 1848, the bourgeoisie sentenced humanity to two more centuries of misfortune by ultimately siding with law and order against poor workers. Programmers enthralled by the Internet revolution could do even worse today: they could become digital Bolsheviks whose attempt to create a democratic utopia produces the ultimate totalitarianism.

On the other hand, if a critical mass of programmers shifts their allegiances to the real struggles of the excluded, the future will be up for grabs once more. But that would mean abolishing the digital as we know it—and with it, themselves as a class. Desert the digital utopia.









# Israeli Anarchism: A History

*We interviewed a longtime participant about the prehistory and development of contemporary Israeli anarchism. He explores the origins of punk and the animal rights movement in Israel and presents a critical analysis of the trajectory of Anarchists Against the Wall, concluding with reflections on the function of nonviolence rhetoric in the conflict between Israel and Palestine.*

**Is there any continuity connecting the contemporary Israeli anarchist movement to currents preceding the countercultural surge of the early 1990s?**

None whatsoever, unfortunately. Then again, it might not be *that* unfortunate.

Throughout the hundred years preceding, Israeli anarchists played a part in some successful endeavors, but always at a costly price: the subjugation of the political to the social, which was basically Buber-Speak\* for attempting to build new worlds *around* the existing one, rather than on its smoldering ashes. The *Kibbutzim* (Jewish socialist agricultural settlements) serve as a cautionary tale—should yet another such tale be needed—of anarchists becoming pawns in authoritarian projects through tentative collaborations based on “temporarily” compromising our *confrontational* and *political* rejection of hierarchy.

Strange as it may sound today, many secular European Jews at the turn of the previous century saw a tacit bond between Zionism and anarchism. Ghettoized and excluded from the national ethos of their own countries, they gravitated towards tendencies that—in their personal lives, if not in the eyes of history—offered opposing magnetic polarities to push back with: anarchism, Marxism, and Zionism. Ironically, as documented by anarchist writers like Voline in Russia, large parts of the Jewish ghettos perceived Zionism to be the craziest and *most utopian* of the three.

So, in what could be seen as a precursor to the pitfalls of modern identity politics, the ties binding the old anarchists to their Jewish identity enabled their *Umanità Nova*, their vision of a new humanity, to be folded into and superseded by Zionism's vision of a new Jewry, the “Muscle Jew” of Israel, set to replace the frightened ghetto one. On the ground, one of the forms this supersession took was the fast-paced morph of egalitarian *Kibbutzim* communities into strategic colonial instruments at the hands of a nascent state bent on driving indigenous populations off the land.

\* Israeli philosopher and early Zionist, Martin Buber (1878-1965).



In this light, it should come as no surprise that in 1994, the first vinyl release of the first Israeli anarchist hardcore band was titled, simply, "Renounce Judaism."

With the establishment of a Jewish state, the Labor Zionism anarchists discovered that the operation had succeeded and the patient had died; much like their contemporaries in the October revolution, the Chinese May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement, and Madero's Mexican uprising—and perhaps yesterday's Occupy movement—their sole reward was having been forgotten players in birthing the entity that deemed them irrelevant.

The end of the Second World War and subsequent immigration of more European Jews into the newly-established Israeli state, with some anarchists amongst them, further galvanized the tension between the political and the social, between identities freely chosen and identities born into, "anarchist" and "Jewish"—a tension nowhere as critical, of course, as within the borders of a Jewish *archos*.

Coming straight out of the Polish ghettos, they proved unwilling or unable to take the ghetto out of their *émigré* selves, and rather than flying the black flag defiantly they simply circled the wagons; in their defense, though, surviving the *Holocaust* might do that to you. They organized themselves into historical societies, cultural associations, philosophical discussion circles, and literary study groups, communicating chiefly in Yiddish, a choice oddly reminiscent of that other closed, black-clad Jewish milieu with its back turned on society—orthodox Hasidic Jews—and in stark contrast to the earlier anarchists of the *Kibbutzim*, who spoke Hebrew. During the '50s and '60s, the Freedom Seekers Association, Israel's main anarchist group, produced a monthly bilingual publication called *Problemen* alongside several books, and maintained a library of classic anarchist literature (again, mostly in Yiddish and Polish) as well as a large hall in central Tel Aviv, drawing hundreds of attendees to non-threatening conferences where anarchy was theorized to death alongside Hassidic parables.

Naturally, introverted and self-contained cultural gatherings came at the expense of agitation, outreach, and organizing, which brings to mind certain punk rock scenery we know only too well. In fact, there doesn't seem to have been even so much as an attempt to build a political anarchist movement.

One anecdote from that era illustrates it perfectly: a Shin Bet agent (Israel's internal security service) came down to an anarchist meeting one day. "I heard you have been discussing the possible ramifications of assassinating the prime minister," he said worryingly.

"Indeed we have," came the reply, "but we were talking about the prime minister of Poland." The agent left and they were never bothered again.

I should note that all was *not* so quiet on the Middle Eastern front at that time. The famous seamen's strike, for example—the most radical and violent strike in Israeli history, which for 40 days brought the country's only commercial port to a standstill—took place in 1951. Incidentally, it was led by a young sailor whose grandson, Jonathan Pollak, would become a key organizer in Israeli anarchism from the '90s onwards. 1962 saw a series of wildcat strikes in the wake of the devaluation of the Israeli pound. Through all this, serious disturbances against ethnic discrimination erupted, led by Jews from Middle Eastern and North African countries living in *Ma'abarot*, refugee absorption camps. In 1949, during one such disturbance, angry mobs smashed windows and ripped doors off their hinges at the temporary Israeli Parliament building; in the following year, a leader of similar protests by Yemenite Jews was the first citizen to be killed by an Israeli policeman's bullet. This, of course, without even mentioning the various forms of resistance Palestinian Arabs were immersed in at the time.

None of the above, as far as I know, elicited any participation or material support from Israel's exilic anarchists, who seem to have been more attuned to Yiddish labor struggles in New York's Lower East Side than in their new surroundings.

Zionism and Judaism aside, another key issue on which post-'90s anarchists broke from the old guard was our blasphemous attitude towards the IDF, the Israeli "Defense" Forces. American anarcho-syndicalist house painter Sam Dolgoff, who visited Israel in the early '70s, captured the prevailing attitude of the old-timers (as well as his own, apparently):

... Israeli comrades are forced, like the other tendencies, to accept the fact that Israel must be defended. [...] In discussion with Israeli anarchists it was emphasized that the unilateral dismantling of the Israeli state would not at all be anarchistic. It would, on the contrary, only reinforce the immense power of the Arab states and actually expedite their plans for the conquest of Israel. [...] the necessity for defense of Israel—freely acknowledged by our comrades—depends upon putting into effect the indispensable military, economic, legislative and social measures needed to keep Israel in a permanent state of war preparation. The Israeli anarchists [...] know only too well that curtailing the power of the state under such circumstances offers no real alternative.





Weekly demonstration in Bil'in, Palestine;  
 photograph by Hamde Abu Rahma ([www.hamdeaburahma.com](http://www.hamdeaburahma.com)).

Correspondingly, when an anarcho-punk collective stirred up controversy with a headline-grabbing anti-IDF issue of its *War of Words* fanzine in 1996, they were reproached in no uncertain terms by the late Joseph Luden, editor of the aforementioned *Problemen* and author of the book *A Short History of the Anarchist Idea*, who expressed a deep disappointment and insisted that the armed forces are “not the enemy.” To us, this showed that the primordial Jewish fear of the Pogrom, of Romans or Crusaders or Cossacks or Arabs awaiting their chance to gut us in our sleep, was strong enough to cloud the judgment of even lifelong anarchists, much like other cultural poisons we drink in with our mother’s milk and never fully get out of our systems.

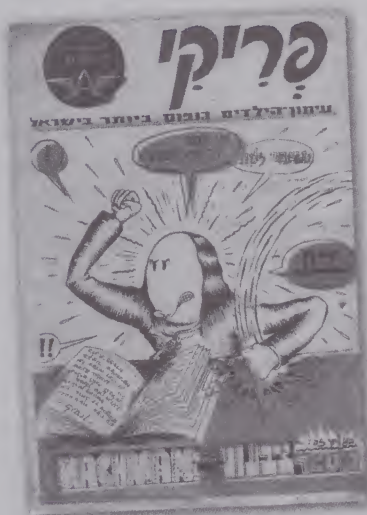
Of course, with the Palestinian death toll reaching its current dizzying heights, attacks on the very existence of a military apparatus, not just its prevalence, have become a more common feature of Israeli radicalism; but the early ‘90s were a different story. Practically all our fellow radicals—when not preoccupied with issues such as the then-popular and extremely safe “religious coercion” theme—were adamant in sharpening a distinction between military duty inside the Green Line (the de facto

Israeli borders), which they considered a moral obligation, and troops deployed *outside* of it, in occupied Palestinian territory, which they thought we should strategically oppose and be jailed for. Even anti-Zionist Trotskyist splinter groups and fringe offshoots, who were basically in the same toy boat as us, encouraged their members to join the military, albeit with the aim of relating better to the average worker.

The 1990s generation of Israeli anarchists was in a position to bring something unique to the table—and we did. At first glance, you could diagnose it as Oppositional Defiant Disorder, perhaps, or revolution for the hell of it: a collective middle finger to the army with no blueprints or analyses or structural adjustment plans to replace it. “Serious” revolutionaries frowned upon this, of course. In hindsight, however, I think singling out militarism showed good instincts, a fine-tuned sense of the changing nature of a key battleground—a battleground that was and remains extremely important in both symbolic and practical terms.

Furthermore, it showed that we knew enough to trust our immediate experiences, letting them guide our decisions. All of us were close to the age





1973 publication of the *Black Front*, *Freaky Anarchist Group*



The back cover of issue 4 of the first Israeli punk fanzine, *Necrophilia for Youth*, published in 1994; the text reads "No Government Can Offer You Liberty."



Cover of issue 4 of the paper *The War of Words*, published in 1996 by the *Isra-hell* collective, covering punk, animal rights, and conscientious objection; the banner reads "No surrender to political terror."

at which the state's attempt to enlist us into Israel's mandatory military service—and the scars we earned fighting that—were still fresh.

To be clear, I don't want to come off as overly critical of the older generations of Israeli anarchists. They were extremely good at many things, just not particularly at being anarchists, or rather at being *anarchic*—at recognizing and prioritizing the projects that are exclusive to anarchist thinking, that *no one else* can offer. In a country where all political factions—left, right and center—had begun as radical subversives not long ago, perhaps "anarchist" should have meant *rebel* rather than *revolutionary*. Nevertheless, I *do* have a tremendous respect for the old-school.

**How did Israeli anarchism arrive with or emerge from the countercultural surge of the early '90s? What characteristics does it retain from that era? What advantages and disadvantages do those confer?**

Even after having been personally involved in both '90s anarchism and the Israeli counterculture of that time, I'm not sure whether modern Israeli anarchism emerged out of the punk explosion, as in other countries during that decade, or whether both were products of the zeitgeist in equal measure. I guess that should be left to the social historians—or maybe the physicists, since Newton's third law

clearly states that all forces are *interactions* between different bodies.

Speaking of physics—if nature indeed abhors a vacuum, it must have been royally pissed off at us as the '90s rolled in. The first Palestinian Intifada had lost momentum and direction after three long years, essentially ending at the Madrid Conference of 1991 (though officially only at the 1993 Oslo Accords). This period, right up to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in late 1995 and the right-wing electoral victory six months later, was marked by a strong sense of euphoria and optimism in the ranks of the left: an uplifting feeling that Peace, ever elusive, was right around the corner, a mere treaty away. Radicals—including anarchists, with the exception of a single individual, if I recall our meetings correctly—were completely co-opted by the so-called Peace Process, accepting it as the only game in town.

There were two reasons for this. First, Fatah opposition to the process had collapsed and Palestinian society seemed to have embraced it wholly, leaving us hesitant to come off as "more Catholic than the Pope." Second, the right's hysterical objection to it lulled us further into thinking this was, on the whole, a positive process. Lesson learned: never choose political paths based on which troll is under what bridge.

However, there was a silver lining in our clouded judgment. As Peace dropped a few spots on the list



of burning issues to attend to, other issues naturally climbed up, and unfamiliar concepts were sucked into the resulting vacuum, suggesting new ways to approach the old problems. And since people are not one-dimensional, with the changes in politics came cultural changes as well: radical ecology and animal liberation, for example, previously unheard of, burst onto the scene shoulder-to-shoulder with a new counterculture of noise, 'zines, street art, international contacts, the do-it-yourself ethic, communal living arrangements, infoshops, independent media, and cross-issue alliances and activist practices. Anarchy, explicit or implicit but always *complicit*, was at the heart of this.

Punk is a good reference point, although this countercultural surge was wider and more aesthetically diverse. Contrary to what many assume, punk's influence was already roughing the edges of Israeli alternative culture in the late '70s, and throughout the '80s punks formed bands, played shows, and released demo cassettes. However, the concept of a "scene" as social unit simply hadn't occurred to anyone. Punk remained extrinsic to cultural identity and thus punks stayed atomized and fragmented, related primarily through this very disconnection, which I'm guessing seemed part of how they thought punk should "feel."

Likewise, there were a handful of anarchists in the '70s and '80s—something I glossed over in answering the previous question—but they did not manage to push past their characterization as isolated outliers. Indeed, this characterization was generally self-imposed. In 1973, for example, on the eve of the Yom Kippur War, a three-man commune calling itself "The Black Front - Freaky Anarchist Group" put out a humorous one-off publication with heavy R. Crumb influences, *Freaky*, while in the '80s three Israeli-Palestinian brothers set up NILAHEM, "Youth for Liberty and Struggle," a small anarchist group in the northern city of Haifa. One of those brothers, our comrade Juliano Mer-Khamis, was murdered by a masked gunman in Jenin refugee camp last year.

Not until the '90s was there a conscious effort to broaden anarchist practice by advancing it further down the trajectory *group* → *organization* → *network* → *movement*. In a heartwarming case of quantum wishful thinking—or was it an attempt to confuse the enemy?—the main anarchist group of the early 90's lacked a formal name and simply called itself "Anarchist Movement."

So, like a real-life chiasmus, '90s punk borrowed from anarchists the autonomous self-organization, the do-it-yourself scene, while '90s anarchists borrowed from punk the chromosome of *expansion*,

propagation driven by a cultural sense of urgency. Through the logic of "if you build it, they will come," each cured the other of its respective *delusions of petitesse*. And, of course, both reinforced in each other the notion that one needn't give a fuck about rules.

The question of what characteristics contemporary Israeli anarchism retains from the '90s is interesting, but a more poignant question would be what characteristics it has lost. In four words: *the element of surprise*.

In the early '90s, we tried our best to avoid becoming "far left," trapped at this or that edge of the political spectrum with nowhere to go but center; instead, we simply did not register on it. Our natural habitat was the left, true—the progressives, the bleeding hearts, the peace camp—but we moved in it like some sort of new and wild exotic animal. We were composed of post-leftists and past-leftists, but we all agreed we didn't want anarchy reduced to the conjugation of a leftist verb. Some pigeonholed us as yet another type of commies, while others interpreted our unconventionality to mean we had nothing relevant to offer those who, in the end, see their lives as conventional. But a lot of people, especially younger ones, were intrigued and open to new messages. The '00s, however, changed that.

Around 2003, during the low tide of the *second* Intifada—one could say parallel but underneath it—a popular struggle against the Israeli Separation Wall exploded, a struggle which could be seen as a sort of different, *third* Intifada. It began—and still rages on—in a handful of small West Bank villages whose lands were being confiscated, either to construct the wall or to fatten up the ever-expanding Jewish settlements. Almost immediately, anarchists recognized this as a situation where our position as Israeli citizens, coupled with our unique brand of confrontational praxis, could make a significant contribution, and thus Anarchists Against the Wall was born.

This was a calculated gamble. In many ways it *did* pay off, but the extreme intensity of that particular struggle made it inevitable that all other facets of our politics would be eclipsed by it, which is precisely what happened. Soon, the term anarchist became synonymous with one thing and one thing only—Palestinian nationalism—through a polarizing dynamic we had known we wouldn't escape. The opportunity to engage the state in a violent, bloody, and charged conflict—although not in an ideal setting for anti-nationalists—came at the expense of our effectiveness in practically all other arenas. We were forced, if you will, to make a choice between





being an *attractive* prospect to the Israeli public and a *threatening* one to the Israeli state; we didn't manage to beat the odds by reconciling the two.

**Besides Anarchists Against the Wall, what other initiatives arose in that era? Describe, for example, the origins and trajectory of the contemporary animal rights movement in Israel.**

I think the most interesting part of the Israeli animal rights movement—certainly the most relevant to radicals—is its inception. Not to oversell it, but it was one of the few genuine *structural* anarchist conspiracies I know of in the last 140 years, and a farsighted one at that. Plus, it worked; perhaps too well.

Needless to say, when I speak of real anarchist conspiracies I do so treading lightly, given the proclivity of law enforcement agencies to conjure up fake ones, whether in Bologna, Moscow, Cleveland\*, or the village of Tarnac† in France. But this was a conspiracy of an entirely different kind.

The concept of animal rights arrived late on the Israeli scene, towards the early '90s, courtesy of anarchists. There had been an anti-vivisection society since '83, but it was caught up in the scientific angle and shied away from the broader implications of its own ethical concerns. Just to illustrate how late things bloomed here: the first book in Hebrew on animal experimentation came out in '91, the first law even to mention the subject was passed in '94, and a translation of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* was not published until '98.

As I mentioned, at the beginning of the '90s, new perspectives took precedence over Palestine-centered politics—a tendency reversed, quite violently, come the new millennium. As anarchists

\* Immediately before May Day 2012, five young men were set up on terrorism charges in Cleveland, Ohio after an FBI infiltrator orchestrated plans to bomb a bridge, in what would have been the only such bombing carried out by anarchists in living memory.

† Over a dozen people were arrested in Tarnac on November 11, 2008; nine were charged with "criminal association for the purposes of terrorist activity."

were leaving no stone unturned in search for new ways to amplify our impact on society, some concluded that, rather than advancing anarchism as a package deal, it would be more effective to introduce it through the prism of a single issue. And so began constant discussions, formal and informal, in sunbathed public parks as well as poorly guarded high-school shelters at midnight, all focused on a single question: which issue could offer the firmest foot in the backdoor, through which to disseminate the widest assortment of radical ideas?

Brief tactical forays were made by some into the terrain of nuclear disarmament, Israel's taboo public secret, as well as social ecology, with the group Green Action, but ultimately we realized that a new and unspoiled lump of clay was needed. And none fit the bill like the hitherto unknown, seemingly safe concept of fighting for the rights of seals or elephants—as fur shops and circuses were the first two major targets of local animal rights campaigns.

While this focal shift was conscious and premeditated, it should not be seen as some manipulative ploy or cynical *The Man Who Was Thursday*-type stuff. Tactical considerations aside, we really *were* passionate and sincere about ending nonhuman suffering—other motives were merely an added bonus, a realization that of all the various injustices we could be organizing around at that particular time and place, animal rights happened to be the most conductive.

Our first group was called, simply, Anonymous, a strange, somewhat dark name for an animal rights organization, unless you keep in mind it was a kind of anarchist front. Besides the aim of radicalizing young animal-lovers who might join in, it had another, more practical aim: to recruit people for clandestine Animal Liberation Front activities. Anonymous' small headquarters, filled to the brim with information about various radical struggles, nonhuman and human, was also the nocturnal rendezvous point for almost all ALF activity in Tel Aviv during that time; it was even conveniently located on Ben Yehuda street, the very same street where most of the cities'



furriers had set up shop! According to interrogators at the adjacent Dizengoff police station, at least, Anonymous activists were the ones who introduced Israeli storeowners (and cops) to superglued locks.

Today, Anonymous for Animal Rights, as it is now known, has grown into Israel's equivalent of PETA, the biggest, most respected mainstream organization in the field, complete with lobbyists and reform-oriented consumer campaigns. This was the end-process of a gradual influx of activists who were not in on the original plan, people whose entire scope truly began and ended with animal rights. Once enough of them were in the core group, the inevitable power struggles and infighting ensued, prompting anarchists to accept the fact that their work there was done—the wooden puppet had become a real boy. It was time to pursue other avenues.

Of course, working above and underground at the same time is not a sustainable strategy for radical organizers, to say the least. But as we learned during those few years, if you are small enough, know your coordinates and read the political map accurately, you might be able to pull it off. It's also not without its perks: somewhere in the middle of that period, for example, I distributed homemade stickers calling for Jewish settlers to be shot in the head, signed with a circled A. The biggest Israeli newspaper at that time made the mistake of reporting that the symbol stood for Anonymous, the animal rights group, so naturally, we sued for defamation of character and settled out of court for a hefty sum, which kept our political activities afloat for a while longer. Who says you can only wear *one* hat at a time, right?

One final thing to note regarding trajectories is the elegant dance of cyclical synergy between anarchism and animal rights. I'm not sure how widely known this is outside of Israel, but just as the animal rights movement was kick-started by anarchists, Anarchists Against the Wall was in turn conceived by animal rights activists, two carrier waves in small congruent circles that would fit neatly within the dialectical materialism of scientific socialists—if by “scientific” we meant *chaos theory*.

One Struggle was a veganarchist group formed around 2002 by some of the people who had left Anonymous in the aforementioned split. Although its professed aim was to engage in antispeciesist agitation from an antiauthoritarian perspective, it succeeded chiefly in implanting antispeciesist perspectives into antiauthoritarian agitation.

In late 2003, as part of a joint effort with Palestinians, One Struggle activists took part in an attempt to dismantle one of the separation barrier's gates near the West bank village of Mas'ha, four

miles from the Green Line<sup>‡</sup>. As in previous One Struggle actions, the accompanying press release was signed with a fictitious name, randomly chosen at the last minute: in this case, “Anarchists Against the Wall.” Israeli soldiers reacted harshly during the action—which, by the way, was successful—firing live ammunition and severely injuring one activist; it was the first time ever that the Israeli army had opened fire on Jewish citizens. In the heat of the



ensuing media frenzy, the name “Anarchists Against the Wall” became indelibly etched into the public mind (sometimes as “Anarchists Against Fences”). One Struggle disbanded after a few years, having fulfilled its historically ordained role—but AAtW carried on in full swing.

Comrades visiting Israel are often surprised at how prevalent antispeciesist discourse is among local anarchists. In fact, even Israeli radicals of the non-anarchist variety needed a few good years to adjust. When Ta'ayush (a radical Israeli organization) attempted to organize the reconstruction of battery cages destroyed by Israeli soldiers in the village of Hirbet Jbara, for example, this met harsh opposition from anarchists; the same thing happened when Gush Shalom organized a solidarity action with Gazan fishermen. The preceding paragraphs shed some light on the historical context for this.

**What were the dynamics between those campaigns and Anarchists Against the Wall as the latter came to define Israeli anarchism?**

<sup>‡</sup> The demarcation line between Israel proper, as its borders were established in 1949, and the territories it has occupied since 1967, including the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights.



When discussing today's Israeli anarchists, one should keep in mind we are not talking about thousands or even hundreds of people, but *dozens*. Concepts like "movement," "characteristics," "dynamics," or "tendencies" should therefore be scaled down to an almost intrapersonal size. In all honesty, two roommates and a small wireless router can become an anarchist tendency here, for better or for worse.

Regarding the question: first of all, as I've already lamented—and in spite of its crucial contributions—AAAtW wrote us back into the left/right binary code that defines and confines Israel's political spectrum, the same spectrum we had tried to escape a decade earlier. We have been "far left" ever since and, unsurprisingly, it has limited our room for maneuver in other arenas. To make matters worse, this binarization was swallowed whole and internalized, slowing down our political metabolism, as we became more and more dismissive of anything and everything that did not speak its name clearly in the language of left/right, Zionism/Intifada dichotomy. One Struggle was at times a fairly good example of this, as was Black Laundry, an anarchist LGBTQ group that began protesting Gay Pride events around the same time, under the slogan "There is no pride in the occupation."

As AAAtW gained momentum, the mere act of participating in radical queer actions, for instance, without mentioning the occupation, became tantamount to "Pinkwashing." When the 9<sup>th</sup> international Queeruptation gathering, held in Tel Aviv in 2006, coincided with Israel's heaviest bombing of Lebanon in 24 years—also known as the second Lebanon War—as well as with the annual WorldPride events scheduled to take place in Jerusalem (but later cancelled), tensions rose violently to the surface at an anti-homophobia-cum-anti-militarist protest in Jerusalem; you can read about it more in the Queeruptation fanzine, specifically the "You Can Call Me Gay"/"You Can Call Me An Anarchist" exchange.

Generally speaking, it felt as if failure to link everything *explicitly* and *incessantly* to the Palestinian issue became a sin of omission, as if all other struggles had been drained of any intrinsic value they might have had. In a way, this was a rehashed version of mistakes New Leftists made, in all their Marxist-Leninist glory, when they relegated every struggle except Third World/Black liberation to secondary status. Unlike the '60s radicals, though, we had no pretense of following scientific analyses of society, so our harsh prioritizing was informal,

seldom articulated or even acknowledged—a result of group dynamics as well as of political definitions in which action really meant reaction. When you are always reacting rather than initiating, you naturally run a higher risk of mirroring the state's priorities rather than your heart's desire.

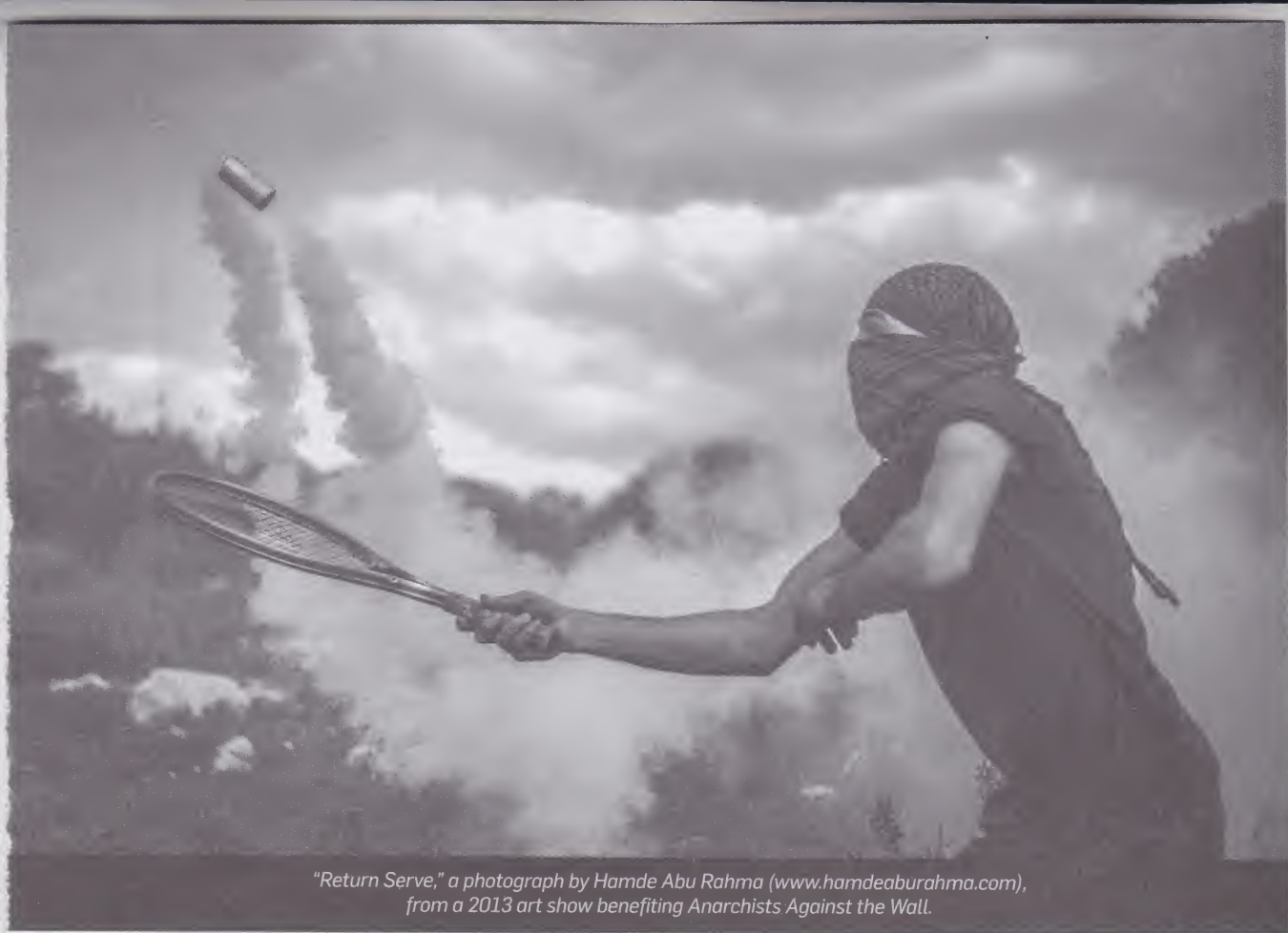
Our readiness to "link" struggles by subjugating all to one is still quite prevalent. The Social Justice tents' protests that gripped Israel in the summer of 2011—a local version of the Occupy movement, largely inspired by the Arab spring—saw anarchists participating with the sole purpose of imposing the Palestinian cause, willfully blind to the myriad of other opportunities the protests opened up for us. As tens of thousands of ordinary people marched through the heart of Tel Aviv's White City behind a wide, tall banner that read "When the Government Is against the People, The People Are against the Government," anarchists reduced themselves to waving anti-occupation placards from the sidelines, conveying a message that nothing, not even genuine popular protest, has any worth unless it carries the West Bank and the Gaza Strip coiled around it like constrictor snakes. In the 2012 Social Justice protests, it looked like more of the same as far as anarchists were concerned.

Attempts to identify this tendency—and, by inference, to recognize AAAtW as a manifestation of sublimated political prioritizing—usually end up locked in emotional and personalized systems of representation, which at best reveal only half a picture. It is true that those were very demanding times for us personally, and that the Palestinian popular struggle, then as now, involves highly charged situations that burn intensely enough to dim out most everything else if you let them. But there is also a more abstract, notional component at play.

Anarchists often use theoretical frameworks that present everything as interwoven and equally important to avoid putting their priorities on the table regarding struggles and issues. Being rather averse to both formulas *and* hierarchies—not to mention formulaic hierarchies!—we tend to favor integrative, circumfluent political outlooks, in which a constant reaffirmation of common grounds trumps that ill-famed need of revolutionaries to identify a key issue, a chief contradiction. And yet, our deliberate vagueness notwithstanding, we *all* prioritize struggles—it's our self-awareness of this that varies. Like hypocrisy, the only sure way to avoid this is to sit at home and do nothing. The important question, then, is not *whether* we prioritize struggles, but what criteria, if any, we employ in doing so. Geography? History? Morality? Mass psychology? And how do

\* Pinkwashing is "a deliberate strategy to conceal the continuing violations of Palestinians' human rights behind an image of modernity signified by Israeli gay life," according to the author of an Op-Ed in the New York Times.





*"Return Serve," a photograph by Hamde Abu Rahma ([www.hamdeaburahma.com](http://www.hamdeaburahma.com)), from a 2013 art show benefiting Anarchists Against the Wall.*

we conceptualize such prioritizing—by definition a process of stratification—to make it compatible with concrete, everyday anarchist politics?

It seems to me that the wrong way to do this is by inertia, by default, by letting the chips fall where they may. Like structures, priorities are most dangerous when they are invisible. And this leads us back to the example of Anarchists Against the Wall.

Anarchists Against the Wall owes the strength of its tactical diction—its very existence, I would say—to the unspoken notion that the Palestinian issue crystallizes the general crisis in Israeli society, that this national conflict is the prime seismic fault line. As far as I know and can remember, there have been no concerted efforts on our part to step back and question the reasoning that anointed this notion as self-evident truth. Through which eyes does this issue crystallize the general crisis? From what perspective is this issue the prime seismic fault line?

We know that politicians, their media, and the phantasm they call "the Mainstream" all adhere to this notion, and work diligently to enforce it, although their criteria is hardly ever discussed in factual terms. It couldn't possibly be based on the number of fatalities, for example, when over a

thousand Israelis die every year from pollution, and car accidents have claimed more lives throughout the country's existence than all of its wars combined; it couldn't possibly be the amount of suffering inflicted—inasmuch as that can be meaningfully quantified—when almost 200,000 Israeli women are battered yearly. No. The question we should be asking instead is plain, and yet cuts deep: *cui bono*? Who benefits most from our accepting an armed, territorial conflict along ethnic, religious and national lines as the center of political gravity?

I assume most anarchists don't need the answer spelled out for them.

And still, somehow, the political prioritizing embodied in AAtW remains essentially the same as the prioritizing propagated by the Israeli state, its media, and their ilk. Very few Israeli anarchists in the last decade have rejected these priorities in favor of economic, feminist, migrant, environmental, gender, or nonhuman struggles, to name but a few divergent perspectives.

In the adrenaline rush to *become an opposition*, we should have taken greater care not to lose the characteristics that also make us a well-rounded alternative, as these two do not always correlate.





*Palestinian children looking out on stolen village land and an Israeli settlement;  
another photograph by Hamde Abu Rahma.*

In many ways, circumstances and a lack of analysis have caused AAtW to become an inverted or cracked-glass reflection of the state's point of view, instead of reflecting something altogether different. This helps explain why it feels so natural for us to cooperate with even the most racist, misogynist, homophobic, intolerant religious zealots the Palestinian resistance has to offer. The philosopher was right in cautioning us about gazing into the abyss, and emphasizing that everything unconditional is a pathology—solidarity included.

I readily acknowledge that all this discussion of prioritizing struggles—in fact, even prioritizing struggles in and of itself—serves only to remind us what matters *least* in life: political reductionism. Also, since the need to prioritize issues exists in inverse proportion to the number of activists and resources available, anarchists in countries with wider movements may not relate to these problems.

### **What role has the rhetoric of nonviolence played in Anarchists Against the Wall, and in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict generally?**

Nonviolence rhetoric works, or rather *doesn't* work, the same the world over, so I'm guessing there's no need to elaborate on the universal flaws of the whole thing. In the case of Palestinian resistance and AAtW,

however, there is a twist to the story: it is no longer simply a matter of nonviolence versus violence, but of nonviolence rhetoric employed, mainly by external forces, to muddy the waters and obfuscate the violent aspect of Palestinian popular resistance—not only its legitimacy or scope or accomplishments, but its very existence, its definition as such.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Although this question presumably refers to nonviolence as a tactical approach, rather than its absolutist, theosophical variety—i.e., pacifism—let's start with the second meaning, just to clarify things.

It will probably not be the shock of your life to learn that pacifists have played no significant role in this region since about the time of the Essenes\*. On the Palestinian side, Muslims who advocate pacifism come exclusively from a very specific Islamic context: the Sufi, or mystical, tradition (yes, like Hakim Bey). However, Sufism was pushed to the margins of Palestinian society long ago by Salafist/Wahhabi Islam, and during the 20<sup>th</sup> century its scope of influence here has been reduced to a few forgotten highland tombs and hilltop shrines dotting the landscape. Some Palestinian Christians, who make up about 3% of those living under occupation, have

\* An ancient Jewish ascetic sect active about 2000 years ago in Palestine. They lived in voluntary poverty, holding property in common.



also been known to preach pacifism, but always heavily diluted with—and ultimately overshadowed by—tactical argumentation. More on that below.

As for the Israeli side, the last three decades, beginning with the 1982 Lebanon War, have seen hundreds of people jailed for refusing to perform military duty (standard sentence is 28 days), but to my knowledge, only *one person* has claimed bona fide pacifism as his motivation; somewhat unexpectedly, it was the nephew of prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Generally speaking, conscientious objectors—or “Refusniks” as they’re known here—belong to two distinct categories. The more conventional ones, characterized by the organizations Yesh Gvul and Courage to Refuse, are older reserve combat soldiers and officers who advocate a selective refusal to serve in the occupied territories, yet strongly identify with and perpetuate militarist and nationalist discourses; indeed, they believe it is precisely this ardent patriotism that legitimizes their critical voice. Younger activists, characterized by the organizations New Profile and Shministim (literally “twelve-graders”), view *any* military position within the army as directly or indirectly perpetuating the occupation, and refuse out of a more radical and comprehensive critique of dominant Zionist narratives, militarism, and male chauvinism. New Profile is explicitly feminist, in stark contrast to both Yesh Gvul and Courage to Refuse, the membership of which is practically all male. Neither category, however, has significant pacifist traits.

Conscientious and pacifist moralisms aside, things get a little more complicated when it comes to nonviolence as a strategy. Again, I’ll start with the Palestinian side.

Like most other national liberation struggles, Palestinians have used a wide range of nonviolent tactics against the encroaching Zionist movement—even prior to Israel’s statehood, while everyone was still under Ottoman and British rule. For example, the 1930s saw local commerce grind to a halt for six whole months due to general strikes against the British mandatory government.

The first Intifada encompassed some of the most memorable examples of Palestinian nonviolence. For example, in the Palestinian Christian city of Beit Sahour, a tax revolt<sup>†</sup> against Israeli occupation

<sup>†</sup> In 1989, people in the town of Beit Sahour organized a city-wide tax strike, asking, “Must we pay for the bullets that kill our children or for the expenses of the occupying army?” In response, Israeli military authorities placed the town under curfew, blocked food shipments and cut telephone lines, tried to bar reporters from the town, imprisoned forty residents, and carried out house-to-house raids seizing millions of dollars in money and property belonging to 350 families.

led to the entire city being placed under siege for 44 days, ending with Israeli soldiers going in and “confiscating” (looting) two million dollars in goods from businesses. But even the second Intifada, an overwhelmingly more violent and militarized uprising remembered for its Qassam rockets and suicide bombings, still saw plenty of boycotts, pickets, vigils, hunger strikes, mass demonstrations, protests, and marches—many following the nearly daily funeral processions—all examples of nonviolent resistance which went largely undetected in Israel and the West. Undetected, that is, until the popular struggle against the Apartheid Wall began taking shape and welcoming Western as well as Israeli activists into its fold.

However, and I can’t stress enough how crucial this is to understand, Palestinians’ definition of nonviolence—often framed within the wider and uniquely Palestinian concept of *sumoud* (steadfast perseverance)—bears only a fleeting resemblance to the nonviolence fetishized by the liberal “Peace Police” types you encounter in the West. The two definitions are as removed from each other as the everyday realities the two groups live and struggle in.

First and foremost, Palestinian nonviolence is completely devoid of “moral high ground” and “stooping to their level” parlance, which for Western anarchists should be a breath of fresh air. Simply put, it is not as concerned with spit-shining its own reflection as it is with achieving its goals. Also, it has been decades since Palestinians have let concerns of negative media coverage lead them by the nose. Past experience has shown quite clearly that sticking to nonviolent resistance did not gain them the support of the so-called international community—even *before* War on Terror hysteria.

The famed “Arab Gandhi,” Mubarak Awad, a Christian Palestinian-American and the main advocate of Palestinian nonviolent resistance, founded the Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence in the ‘80s. He was quite honest about this being a practical rather than Gandhian matter (although he is still politically savvy enough to conflate the two occasionally):

For the Palestinians who are living in the West Bank and Gaza during this period, the most effective strategy is one of non-violence. This does not [...] constitute a rejection of the concept of armed struggle. Simply put, the thesis is that during this particular historical period, and with regard only to the 1.3 million Palestinians living under the Israeli occupation, non-violence is the most effective method to obstruct the policy of “Judaization.”





*Tear gas canisters rain down upon a protest at the separation wall as the Israeli flag flies in the background.*







His disciple, Nafez Assaily, who operates his own small nonviolence project in the city of Hebron today, makes this equally clear. Referring to Yasser Arafat's speech at the UN—delivered while holding a gun in one hand and an olive branch in the other—Assaily points out that “neither hand cancels the other.”

It has been my experience that, in the Palestinian political vocabulary, “nonviolent” means “unarmed”—and even then, only if by *arms* you mean guns, not bottles filled with petrol and motor oil. Nonviolence is used as a term to describe broad popular resistance, actions everyone can participate in, as opposed to armed struggle, which is conducted by the few.

Note how, unlike liberals, the Palestinian nonviolence advocates I quoted do not juxtapose nonviolence with, say, rock throwing or window breaking, but only with picking up the gun. In his open letter to Chris Hedges\*, David Graeber mentions meeting an Egyptian activist who, speaking of last year's popular uprising, expressed a similar point of view: “Of course we were non-violent. No one ever used firearms, or anything like that. We never did anything more militant than throwing rocks!”

If I may reach back once more to the American New Left for comparison, the '60s antiwar organization SDS defined itself as “not violent, but not nonviolent,” which although a bit tongue-twisting is much more accurate, not to mention honest. This definition is what Palestinians have in mind when they speak of a nonviolent struggle, especially in the context of the ongoing demonstrations against the Apartheid Wall.

Palestinians, like almost everybody except the domineering doctrinaires of nonviolence in the West, do not consider self-defense a form of violence; this broadens their definition of nonviolence significantly. And since they happen to live under military occupation, any damage they inflict on the occupiers—soldiers, bureaucrats, cops, machinery operators, border police or settlers—is essentially a form of self-defense. This is true even according to the conservative standards of international law—specifically, the 1960 UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples—not that we should give a damn about legalities. This broader, fluid definition might make it harder for the zealots of nonviolence to maintain their rigid and moralistic demarcations, but for the

rest of us it's simply an affirmation of common sense. For all their stupidity, US Libertarians have a clearer, self-explanatory term for this: the Non-Aggression Principle. You don't start shit, but you reserve the right to respond.

Lastly, if one steps back to examine nonviolence rhetoric in Palestine from a wider socio-political perspective, it seems clear that a significant part of the reason it did not—indeed, *could not*—take root in the resistance movement lies in that fact that the concept was introduced to Palestine in the '80s. At that time, the Palestinian Liberation Organization—whose charter specifically listed armed struggle as the *sole* means of liberation—reigned supreme as the unchallenged representative. It was a time before religious organizations began speaking in nationalist terminology and entered the political arena, before Hamas turned Islam into a liberation theology. Proposing a means of resistance outside the PLO was taboo, tantamount to directly challenging the organization's authority—especially from an outsider, as Mubarak Awad was. Indeed, the PLO leadership exiled in Tunis at the time viewed nonviolence rhetoric as a potential threat to its power, and was extremely hostile to it. During the Beit Sahour tax revolt, for instance, the PLO denied logistical help to the participants, actively discouraged other communities from joining in, and refused financial aid to those persecuted for tax resistance—while offering it to the families of those killed or wounded in violent clashes.

Of course, violence was the dominant motif of Palestinian resistance for its obvious symbolic value as well: the empowerment it offers a people who—much like Israeli Jews!—carry within their national identity a strong historical sense of being powerless, almost ontological victims. Come to think of it, this might be true for many anarchists, too. The PLO's largest faction, Fatah, included in its internal charter a telling affirmation that “armed struggle is a strategy and not a tactic” (Article 19), and one of its first pamphlets was a translation of Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, which famously glorifies violence as restoring self-respect, freeing “the natives” from their inferiority complex, and even serving to “unite the people.” All of this somewhat blurred the line between means and ends, rendering it highly unlikely that nonviolence rhetoric could gain a strong foothold in Palestinian resistance, even in its purest tactical form.

On the Israeli side, Anarchists Against the Wall and the International Solidarity Movement have been among the chief propagators of the myth of Palestinian nonviolence, knowing full well that to

\* Chris Hedges is a liberal journalist who sought to demonize “black bloc anarchists” as a “cancer” threatening the Occupy movement. His rhetoric was appropriated by authority figures hoping to divide the movement and police seeking to justify repression.





*Israeli activist from Anarchists Against the Wall arguing with Israeli soldiers as they advance toward the village of Bil'in during the weekly Friday protest.*

Western audiences—practically our only audience—the term is understood in a contextually different and significantly narrower way. This is accomplished not so much by outright lying as by omission, by silently taking advantage of ambiguity, or by clinging to technicalities, real or imagined but insignificant either way: for instance, the claim that the *shebab* slinging rocks are not technically part of the protest marches or demonstrations. This claim is disingenuous. First, because the popular committees that organize the protests in each village do, in fact, cooperate and coordinate crowd movement with the stone-throwing youth—perhaps not in advance, but in real time; perhaps not always, but often enough. Second, because the supposed categorical distinction between “stone-throwers” and “protesters” exists only in theory, without a trace of it on the ground. And finally, because even if it did exist, both groups form equal parts of the broader phenomenon we call the Palestinian popular struggle.

There are other reasons why the myth of Palestinian nonviolence is being disseminated ad nauseum, becoming truth by virtue of repetition. Where the more liberal or mainstream elements in Palestinian society are concerned, for example, it is largely a

question of cold hard cash: 30% of the Palestinian GDP comes from foreign aid. Naturally, the various foundations, charities, and governments funding the hundreds of Palestinian NGOs in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are unanimous in their insistence on nonviolent politics, along with its accompanying rhetoric. With Palestinian NGOs pushing this line, activists in the West are all too happy to toe it, and facts be damned.

Among Israeli radicals, including AAtW, you'd be surprised how often everything boils down to unresolved liberal complexes, and a tendency to simplify things for politically correct crowds using banal syllogisms: a) good guys are not violent, b) Palestinians are the good guys in this conflict, c) ergo, the Palestinian popular struggle is nonviolent. To put it differently, since Israeli soldiers inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, Palestinians are expected to do the opposite.

Today, as hundreds, perhaps thousands of videos from ten years of weekly demonstrations are available online for anyone to watch, it is truly a testament to the power of cognitive dissonance that people can go on referring to this struggle as “nonviolent.” But politically speaking, the most



worrying aspect of all this is the delegitimization of Palestinian violent resistance, inherent in the perpetuation of the nonviolence myth. Rather than fool ourselves that Palestinians should be or are responding nonviolently to the violence inflicted on them, we should admit, embrace, and *wholeheartedly* support Palestinian violence against the far greater violence of Israeli Apartheid.

Furthermore, the prevalence of nonviolence rhetoric in reference to Palestinian resistance contrasts greatly with the general acceptance among radicals, even among the liberal left, of violence from Zapatista communities defending themselves against paramilitaries—or Naxalites in the forests of India resisting infrastructure companies with landmines and automatic rifles—or MEND rebels in the Niger Delta fighting Western corporations by attacking oil wells and pipelines, killing workers, security guards, and soldiers in the process. It makes no sense at all. As some Palestinians themselves have asked recently, I strongly urge everyone to once and for all get treated for their nonviolence obsession wherever Palestinian resistance is concerned.

Now, regarding AAtW's own tactics, as Jewish citizens and unequal partners in the joint struggle, nonviolence has always been our default setting. Since the very beginning we have been careful to play a strictly supportive role, never leading or taking initiatives—which is usually what the vanguardist tendencies latent in political violence end up pushing one towards. Initially, we had decided not to adopt nonviolence as a collective guideline, leaving the question open for each individual to answer as she saw fit. After the first couple of years, however, certain key activists began pressing for a formal resolution in favor of nonviolence, and this actually became the primary bone of contention in AAtW.

On the surface, the reasons for this demand were purely practical, and they make sense. The first reason is that nonviolence enables us to offer a safer network for less militant activists, as well as mainstream members of the left, who wish to attend demonstrations in West Bank villages. This is an important function, since prior to the joint struggle many Israelis had not seen the reality of the occupation and the Apartheid Wall up close with their own eyes. The nonviolence tagline has contributed considerably to hundreds of Israelis witnessing the brutality of the Israeli army firsthand, something which AAtW would have never achieved without being perceived as nonviolent. The second reason has to do with our ability as Jewish citizens to prevent soldiers from using certain types of lethal force, for example live ammunition, by our presence

in Palestinian demonstrations, given that soldiers have separate and stricter rules of engagement for Jews than they do for Palestinians. Basically, some within AAtW felt that if Israeli participants were to engage actively in violence against soldiers, it would gradually erode our ability to use our Jewish privilege as a deterrent, until eventually we lost it altogether.

These are valid concerns, yet I cannot help but feel that, not too far below the tactical surface, lie the usual liberal sensibilities and anxieties vis-à-vis the use of violence; and also that, beneath the political rationale for utilizing our Jewish privilege, lies an all-too-common personal fear of giving up one's privilege, period. Furthermore, regarding our role as a sort of "human shield," it has been my experience that most soldiers already assume Israeli anarchists throw stones at them alongside Palestinians, or, if not, that they at least support and facilitate the stone-throwing, which is bad enough in their book. Israeli soldiers do not place such high importance on intricate, college-educated ethical distinctions between a person throwing rocks at them and another person standing nearby, defending the first one's right to do so. In other words, a soldier's desire to avoid the legal troubles associated with shooting a Jewish citizen plays a much more significant role in his reluctance to open fire on us than does his impression that Israeli anarchists "don't deserve it." I have no doubt combat soldiers think we deserve it, regardless of whether we actually join stone-throwers or just protect them.

### Additional Reading

*It's All Lies*, a collection of radical Israeli publications and posters, 1991-2005

Anarchists Against the Wall: [www.awalls.org](http://www.awalls.org)

CrimethInc. in Hebrew: [www.mevakerhamedina.blogspot.com](http://www.mevakerhamedina.blogspot.com)





## Eternity by the Stars

Louis-Auguste Blanqui

translated and introduced by Frank Chouraqui

*Contra Mundum*, 2013

Every human being is eternal at every second of existence. These lines I am writing at this moment, in a dungeon of the Fort du Taureau, I have written and shall write again forever, on a table, with a quill, in these clothes, in identical circumstances...

Yet there is one shortcoming: there is no progress. Alas! ...So far the past represented barbarity, and the future meant progress, science, happiness, illusion! This past has witnessed the disappearance of the most brilliant civilizations; they disappeared without a trace, and they will do so again, without leaving more of a trace. On billions of earths, the future will witness the very same ignorance, the very same foolishness, and the very same cruelties...!"

Published in 1872, this work of amateur astronomy may well be the original source of Friedrich Nietzsche's celebrated notion of the Eternal Return. The hypothesis runs thus: if time and space are infinite, but all matter is composed of a finite number of elements, then there is enough time and space for an infinite range of combinations of matter to recur. The whole history of the world must repeat itself infinitely in every possible variation, not only before and behind us in time, but also in every direction around us in space. In Nietzsche's words, which echo Blanqui's: "The eternal hourglass of existence is upended again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"

Jorge Borges and Walter Benjamin, too, were transfixed by this text. Milan Kundera reprised Nietzsche's version in the opening pages of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Yet this is the first published English translation of a largely forgotten book.

Its appearance is doubly relevant to us, for the author was no mere *littérateur*, but an ardent insurrectionist. Legendary for being imprisoned for the majority of his adult life, under practically every government ruling France between 1830 and 1880, Blanqui personified the eternal insurgent. This apostle

of conspiracy ceaselessly organized secret societies to seize power, in hopes of abolishing inequality by force of arms. Though the exact mechanics of the second step were never clear, he pursued the first step with a monomaniacal determination that led, again and again, to the defendant's bench and the prison cell.

The anguish of the frustrated liberator bleeds from the page in his personification of the astral bodies:

Poor stars! Their splendid role is only sacrificial... They do the sowing, but not the harvesting. They have the charges, but not the benefits. Although they are the masters of force, they only use it to aid the weak. Dear stars! You shall find few imitators.

Indeed, the stars' lives reprise the trajectory of the intransigent revolutionist:

Every one of these newborns shall first have a lonely childhood, as a fiery and turbulent cloud.

As a teenager, Blanqui joined the secret society of the Carbonari; his mother nursed him back to health after he was wounded three times in the student protests of 1827, twice by sabers and once by a bullet on the barricades. Decorated for his fighting in the 1830 revolution, he went to prison the following year for continuing to fight against the new regime.

Having become calmer with time, the young star will gradually draw from its own bosom a large family, soon cooled down by isolation and now only subsisting thanks to the paternal warmth. He shall be the only representative of his dynasty in a world that will know only him, and he will never lay eyes on his children.

Blanqui met Amélie-Suzanne in 1825, when she was not yet a teenager; they married in 1834, and for a time, the sun shone in the Blanqui household.







But he was arrested for the Society of the Families conspiracy, and as soon as he was released on parole, he organized the Conspiracy of the Seasons; in 1839, he led an unsuccessful uprising, for which he was sentenced to death. Amélie-Suzanne died in 1841 as he languished on the island prison of Mont Saint-Michel, separated from her by tide, stone, and steel. Blanqui's son grew up fatherless.

How many billions of icy cadavers are crawling like this in the night of space, awaiting the hour of destruction, which will also be the hour of resurrection!

Released by the revolution of 1848, he was arrested within a few months for trying to topple the new government. Imprisoned with Proudhon and other luminaries in Saint-Pélagie prison, he preferred the company of Machiavelli's *The Prince*. In 1865, he escaped; it was extraordinary that he was still alive after his repeated brushes with death, not only at the guillotine but also from bouts of cholera and tuberculosis. In 1870, he joined an unsuccessful coup at the Town Hall—the same building he had tried to storm in 1839 and 1848—and only narrowly escaped.

On March 17, 1871, the night before the revolt that sparked the world-famous Paris Commune, Blanqui was captured again. While his comrades fought and died, he was forced to sit out the revolution he had longed for all his life, incarcerated as the sole inmate of the island prison of the Fort du Taureau. The Commune was crushed, and with it an entire era came to an end: in the final bloody act, even the Town Hall that Blanqui had coveted was burnt to the ground. This is the context in which the sixty-six-year-old veteran sat down to compose *Eternity by the Stars*, a dramatic departure from the political manifestos and martial instructions he had previously authored.

But is it not a consolation to know that at every moment, on billions of earths, we are in the company of beloved people, people who are now only a memory for us? Is it not another consolation to think that we have tasted this happiness and that we shall taste it again?

Every atom has participated in every possible permutation of eternity, but cannot breathe a word to us of what it has seen, what it has been. We inhabit a universe that tessellates into infinity, yet that which we wish for is always beyond our reach: "Everything we could have been on this earth, we are it somewhere else."

Long after Nietzsche discovered this book, Borges wrote and rewrote the story of the man trapped

in prison and eternity. Benjamin poured over this text, the world exploding outward around him. Each of them sensed, perhaps, that somewhere across an impassable chasm of space and time, some other version of himself sat at a table in the Fort du Taureau with a quill. The insurrectionist, the philosopher, the novelist, the critic: the same elementary particles, rearranging themselves endlessly in different configurations.

—RT

Blanqui's influence is not limited to philosophy and literature. In 1894, standing trial for throwing a bomb into the French Chamber of Deputies, the anarchist Auguste Vaillant concluded his courtroom speech with an obscure reference to Blanqui's cosmology:

Ah! gentlemen, how little a thing is your assembly and your verdict in the history of humanity; and human history, in its turn, is likewise a very little thing in the whirlwind which bears it through immensity, and which is destined to disappear, or at least to be transformed, in order to begin again the same history and the same facts, a veritably perpetual play of cosmic forces renewing and transferring themselves forever.

We can imagine the bewilderment of the court officials at this apparently arbitrary departure from the more pressing matter of the defendant's impending death sentence. From Vaillant's perspective, on the other hand, it was very much to the point: having sacrificed his life on the altar of the deed, he had every reason to invoke eternity as his witness and vindication. What grim consolation: to think that he would suffer in poverty, strike his quixotic blow, and be executed again and again into infinity!

This is reminiscent of Nietzsche's *amor fati*, the determination to love one's destiny regardless of its hardships. But must we really imagine Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian whose suicide set off the revolts of 2010-2011 in North Africa, demanding that his life and death should also recur eternally? And if not, who are we to judge him, according to Nietzsche's framework, *unhealthy*?

A century after Vaillant, in *The Insurrectional Project*, Alfredo Bonanno answered the question of whether history has a cyclical or linear pattern with distantly familiar rhetoric:

There is no such thing as linear history... reality is of a circular movement wherein the barbarity of the past can present itself at any time. In this



circular movement nothing is ever old or new, but rather everything is always different—which does not mean that it is more, or less, progressive. That is why it is necessary to begin again each time, identify the enemy, the class enemy, the social enemy, power, and attack it, always with new means. It is something of the work of Sisyphus, and anarchists have this quality of Sisyphus, of always starting at the beginning again, because, like him, they never give up. And with this moral strength of theirs they are superior to the gods, just like Sisyphus.

Reading this, we can almost imagine a secret society of insurrectionists passing down Blanquist doctrine from one doomed generation to the next, like Gnostics. It is always the time to attack; now is the eternally repeated moment of insurrection—there is no other.

Blanqui studiously avoids ethics throughout *Eternity by the Stars*; he pretends not to be concerned with it at all. But this does not mean we should understand his book merely as a melancholy farewell to the revolutionary ambitions that drove him throughout his life; he was still delivering incendiary speeches nine years after its publication, on the day of his fatal stroke. Reading him as a sort of insurrectionist *avant la lettre*, it is possible to understand this work as implying an insurrectionist ethics. If there is no progress, only an infinity of worlds extending throughout time and space, then the locus of meaning cannot be the future effects of any action, but only the action itself. Rather than capitulating, Blanqui eternally shoulders his Sisyphean burden—affirming it over every other possibility, if not with the happiness Camus imagined, at least with a moralist's certainty. He has produced a valorization of struggle that is impervious to a thousand defeats, even to the certainty of permanent defeat.

This brings us to the crux of the matter. Blanqui's cosmology is poetic, and the same ethos seems to underlie some contemporary anarchist practice. But what does this say about our ethos, our practice?

For, though we receive the expression “No Gods, No Masters” from him, Blanqui was no anarchist. His book, like the example of his life, is moving, but his politics are not ours. Like many socialists of his time, he allowed that “honest anarchy” would be the future of humanity, yet he focused on constructing secret societies with himself at the helm. The idea was to draw the masses into action via a surgical strike, but in action the masses, too, were to accept his leadership. It's no coincidence that the police prefect of the Paris Commune was one of Blanqui's protégés. In sidestepping the mechanics of social

change aside from arms and organization, Blanqui neglected the question of power itself.

This is noteworthy, first, because it didn't work. Blanqui labored tirelessly to construct the perfect strategy—memorizing the labyrinth of Paris's streets, identifying the choke points, hand-picking cadre after cadre. But his clandestine groups proved to be very difficult to steer. In theory, they were structured in a strict hierarchy, so that everyone would benefit from his shrewdness and discretion. In practice, to keep hold of the reins, he always had to race along behind the impatience of his cohorts, striking too early, plunging into the tactical errors that repeatedly doomed his endeavors.

Yet this 19<sup>th</sup> century failure had a successful 20<sup>th</sup> century counterpart: Vladimir Ilich Lenin, who perfected the art by which a closed, hierarchical group might seize power and transform society. Victorious, Lenin merely traded one needless tragedy for another, re-imposing the apparatus of violence he fought against beneath a different banner. Lenin's successors found themselves racing, not just to keep hold of the reins, but to butcher each other and the masses they had set out to elevate. Only in defeat does a Blanqui become a sympathetic figure, grappling with the essential tragedy of the permanence of loss.

Lenin's conception of history was Marxist—linear rather than cyclical—but that doesn't guarantee that there is no link between Blanqui's ethics and the authoritarian trajectory that followed from his example. How much of this heritage is present, if unspoken, in our assumptions and methodology today? Following Vaillant and Bonanno, should we locate meaning in the deed itself—a gesture hanging eternally in space and time—rather than in progress towards an ideal? Or is there a third path, offering some other relation to time, progress, causality, meaning?

These questions strike at the heart of the anarchist project. In the meantime, this book makes for beautiful reading.

## Further Reading

Friedrich Nietzsche: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *The Gay Science*, and selections from the notes published as *The Will to Power*

Jorge Borges: “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” “The Aleph,” “The Library of Babel,” “The Garden of Forking Paths,” “The South,” “The Theologians,” “The Other Death”

Walter Benjamin: “Central Park” from *Essays on Baudelaire*



## APPENDIX:

### Interview with Frank Chouraqui, translator of *Eternity by the Stars*

*Frank Chouraqui's introduction and annotations add a great deal to Blanqui's book. We conducted the following interview with him to get a little deeper into some of the questions it poses, and to give readers context for the perspective he brought to the translation.*

**How did you first come to read this book and to decide that you wanted to translate it?**

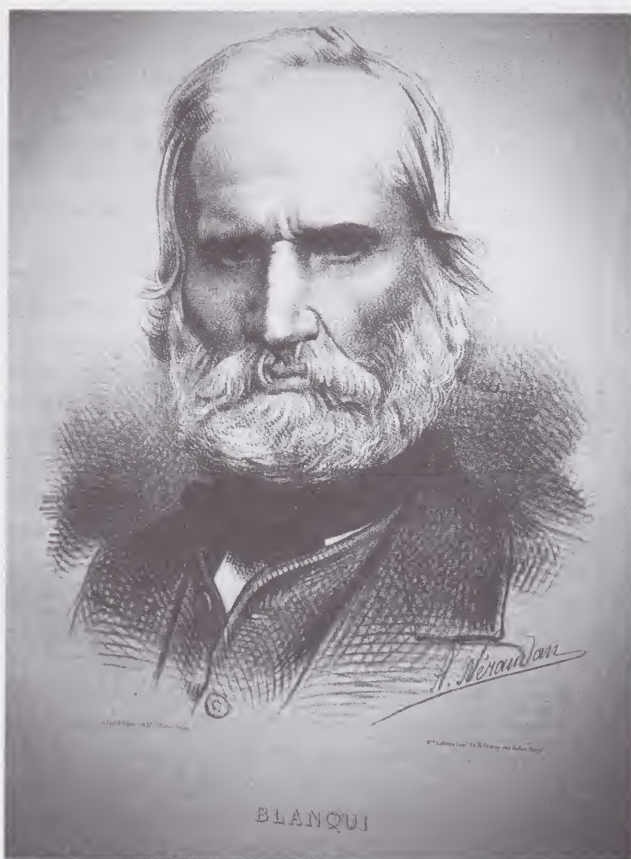
I had been aware of this cryptic remark in Nietzsche's notebook of 1883, where he jots down the reference to *Eternity by the Stars*. I guess it was always on my unconscious to-do list to have a look at Blanqui's book. Nietzsche seems so remote from him, in many ways, personally but especially politically.

I was reminded of this one day when I went to a lecture by French astrophysicist Jean-Pierre Luminet. It was quite a broad presentation of the current state of scientific cosmology, but for a layman like me, it was an inspiring moment, and Luminet mentioned in passing how intrigued he was to find out only recently about Blanqui's theory of multiverses. The next day—and I'm not trying to imply anything about serendipity here—I received an email from *Contra Mundum* editor Rainer J. Hanshe, whom I knew as editor of the Nietzsche journal *The Agonist*, and of *Hyperion*, suggesting we both work on an English translation of the book. I think on his part, he heard it mentioned by Keith Ansell-Pearson, a clear sign that there would be an interest in the book from an interesting crowd, at least in the Nietzsche scholarship. It turned out that there was more than Nietzsche entangled in Blanqui's text. It seems to stand at the crossroads of many intellectual trajectories, both for individuals and for cultural movements.

**The subject matter of *Eternity by the Stars* seems to be quite a departure from the revolutionary proclamations and instructions that have survived as the bulk of Blanqui's previous writing. Does anything in his earlier works foreshadow this interest?**

One might be allowed to regard Blanqui as one of the first systematic revolutionaries. He believed that revolution was a way of life for an individual, and a way of being for a society. This is made obvious by his reluctance before victory, for victory cannot call for more revolution and revolution seems to become an end in itself as he progresses in his own

thinking. What is striking about his first approach to the idea that revolution encompasses all areas of life is his over-pragmatic tone of writing and style of action. In all his pre-*Eternity* writings, Blanqui is very concrete in naming his enemies, calculating dates and figures. Revolution is a matter of means and ends. It is the opposite of a utopia in the sense many of us use the term today. This is consistent with his systematicity: if revolution is a material organization of forces and the purpose of one's life



and entire way of being, a truly human life must be pragmatic. At first sight, nothing is more remote from cosmological speculations.

It seems to me however—and maybe this is Nietzsche's influence—that any system cannot entirely rely on an analysis of means and ends, and Blanqui is often moved to some sort of meta-ethical questions, generally in eloquent and lyrical moments where he attempts to ground the necessity for revolution in more than a simple state of forces, but in something like universal justice, and even nature. These are



passages where he talks of a universal, latent, and yet necessary brotherhood, that stretches to the past and the future across generations, sometimes a brotherhood of men, regardless of class, sometimes—and it is important—of men with women, and sometimes to include all beings, and animals. It is clear in such passages that Blanqui wants to ground proletarian politics in nature and emphasize that bourgeois politics is grounded in power alone. The implication, of course, as we see it recur throughout the history of systematic revolutionism, is that power plays are contingent, and that revolution is necessary, with all the paradoxes that one may perceive as following from this.

Here we come to two of the distinctive features of *Eternity*: first, the lyrical remarks on the brotherhoods of worlds, and our common origin, and the dissolution of the bourgeois sense of self as grounded in contingent class identities. The second is the attempt at a totalizing worldview, the attainment of a point of view where political action becomes grounded in something more fundamental than politics. This is, I think, the long chain that connects Blanqui's writing in general and the strange text of *Eternity*. This is not to say that *Eternity* fits comfortably with the other texts, for if Blanqui's hope was to achieve meta-ethical justification of revolution in *Eternity*, it looks very much like he achieved just the opposite.

Blanqui is at pains to distinguish himself from the fantasist Charles Fourier, whose utopianism struck him as pernicious and comic. "It's not a matter of anti-lions..." Blanqui insists, referencing one of the invented beings Fourier claimed would appear when his system was realized.

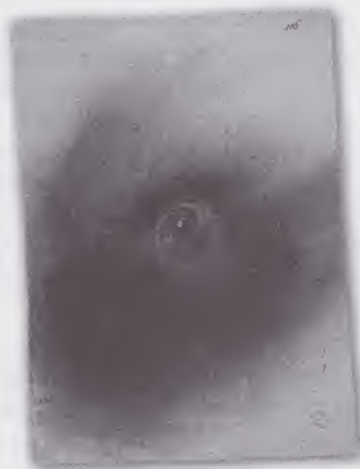
Yet it is difficult not to compare the two authors. For all their differences, both called for complete social transformation, both coped with personal isolation by composing speculative cosmologies, neither could resist personifying the stars—Fourier describing their sex lives, hierarchies, and forced marches, Blanqui their childhood, parenting, and death. Could one trace a lineage of French narrative cosmography linking Fourier to Blanqui, via other autodidacts and eccentrics who set out to people what Pascal called "the eternal silence of these infinite spaces"?

What a nice question! The parallels between Blanqui's writings in general and Fourier are so striking that in their classic edition of Blanqui's texts, Miguel Abensour and Valentin Pelosse have placed extracts of Fourier on the left-hand page opposite Blanqui's

own text throughout his *Instructions pour une prise d'armes*. The effect is striking. Things are less literal when it comes to *Eternity*, but this is only natural; very little is literal in *Eternity*. The move from revolution to cosmology is what matters and the core of what one might call the psychological enigma of Blanqui. And this move had been made by Fourier.

So the instinct to move from politics to cosmology, as I just suggested, seems to me to be coming from a fundamental moral naturalism in 19<sup>th</sup>-century socialism and radicalism: justice is more fair than injustice because of natural rights. And so we must invest the field of systematic cosmology with the hope of finding values lurking at the confines of the universe.

In terms of a certain French lineage of this idea, it seems to me—and this should really be an object of in-depth study rather than a matter of my own speculation—that a certain step has been made in Victor Hugo's *Chatiments*, the collection of poems aimed at Napoleon III and written in exile. In this remarkable collection, Hugo, in his own typical way, reinforces the sense of scandal before the political injustice and buffoonery of Napoleon III by showing nature rebel against him: bees, oceans (who are often compared to "the people"), lions, and of course, the star who in "Stella," presents herself as the messenger of "the Angel Freedom, the Giant Light." We also know that this is a time in Hugo's life where astronomical imagery made its way into his own paintings—some of which are so strikingly relevant to Blanqui that we even considered them for the cover of the book, for example the remarkable etchings called "planete-oel."



Victor Hugo's *Planete-oel*



In the French context therefore, it seems to me that even if all the late XVIII<sup>th</sup>-century enlightenment contains some sort of naturalistic romanticism—from Rousseau, of course, but also all the way to Robespierre—the renewal of the connection of the forces of nature with that of the people and of the writer began with the *Chatiments*.

Though Blanqui avoids ethics throughout *Eternity by the Stars*, it is possible to read it as implying an ethics suitable for a perennially unsuccessful insurrectionist. If there is no progress, only an infinity of worlds extending throughout time and space, then the locus of meaning cannot be the future effects of any action, but only the action itself. He has produced a valorization of his chosen struggle that is impervious to a thousand defeats, even to the certainty of permanent defeat.

Yes, you put it in a very subtle manner, and the issue is very subtle. I think it is one of the main features of Blanqui's vision that revolution is an end in itself, and yet, he keeps hoping for a political life that *actually* embodies, fosters, and protects universal brotherhood. The way you formulate this question reveals the potential tensions between these two projects, and they are the tensions at work in *Eternity* too.

The bottom line, I think, is: should we identify value with actuality? For Blanqui, this precludes revolution. Of course, the problem is now to identify value with revolution, but this precludes victory. For any victory would mean the end of revolution. If such is the case, it means that fueling revolution with such existing, crowd-moving aspirations as peace, justice, and brotherhood is a travesty, for all that revolution can offer is continuous strife. In this context, the cosmological view may seem to offer an alternative, for in Blanqui's calculation, what we find is the identity of actuality and potentiality: all that is possible is actual. If this discovery is used powerfully, one can value revolution no longer for what it can lead to, but for the very fact that it exists.

The problem, of course, as Nietzsche pointed out, and many leftist thinkers since, is that the actual project of the revolution cannot be the same as the project of the masses, for the masses seek peace, and the revolution seeks strife. I don't think Blanqui really ever came to a final position on the question. What we can say—and it is already quite a lot—is that he embodied the question in ways that stand in themselves as a contribution to radical thought. His life poses the question that runs throughout radicalism: is any good politics a dead politics, a politics that exceeds human demands and therefore

refuses to be contested from within? If given human aspirations must be taken into account, the answer will be yes. If revolution has a value superior to that of any human aspiration, no.

**How did your reading of Blanqui's work color your perspective on the events in Turkey originating in Gezi Park last summer? (Frank Chouraqui teaches philosophy at Koç University in Istanbul.)**

Blanqui's insistence on pragmatism immediately comes to mind. Whether the aim is the end of power or to put the power in the right people's hands (assuming this means anything at all), Blanqui always knew that we always begin with the given, and the given is a game of power mediated by institutions. The Turkish uprisings have taught all of us external observers many lessons. But there is an idealism that relies on a certain share of wishful thinking at the heart of any popular uprising, and this may be one of the limitations of this powerful movement. At the end of the day, barring a full-on revolution that very few believe in and even less hope for, this will be settled electorally and legally, and Blanqui's pragmatism would suggest that this movement must agree to move to this arena too (again, this is in the perspective where revolution is not the ultimate aim; Blanqui was happy to refuse the game of politics when the stake was revolution itself).

Secondly, it seems to me that if we accept the alternative between politics and the death of politics (that is to say the death of contestation) in totalitarianism, the Turkish movement has made an instinctive decision that their mission was to save politics from the totalizing tendencies of the ruling party. This is a very remarkable position for a grassroots movement to be in: the aim is restricted success; it is the reintroduction of difference, relative and symbolic strife within structures of power that are designed for systematicity and not for debate. This is more than a grain of salt in the cogs of power; it is a reminder that we cannot use the very force of history (a force that has made the ruling party successful so far) to slam history shut by subtracting dialectical play from it. This would be the end of the Turkish success story, and the freezing of the constant creativity Blanqui tries to envisage as our constant chance at redemption in his crazy little book.



The operation succeeded,  
but the patient died









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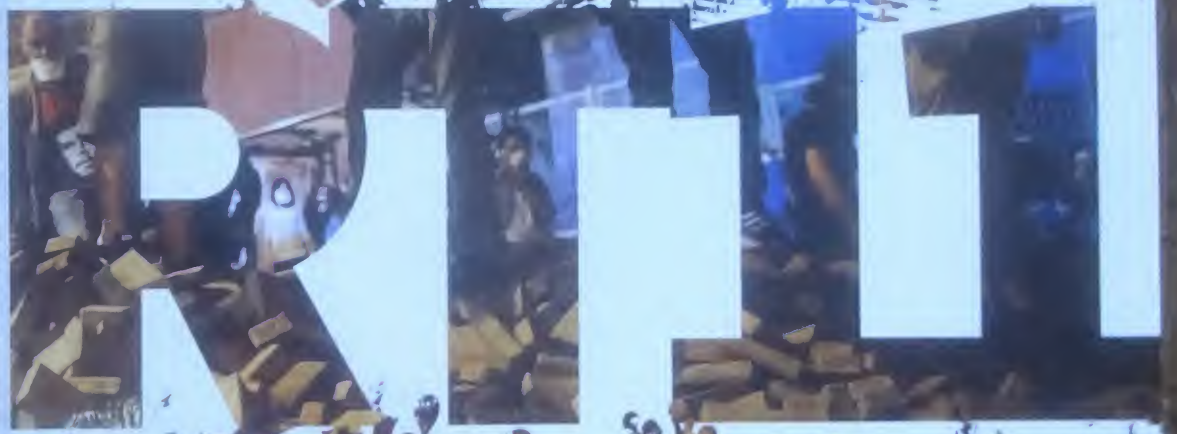


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